PLATO AND LEVINAS:

THE PROBLEM OF JUSTICE

by

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I. Introduction.

In the words of Emil Fackenheim[1], the Holocaust is the rupture that "ruptures philosophy". That singular event throws into question the very foundations and entire history of Western thought. Yet the terrifying reality of the Holocaust was only one of countless indisputable demonstrations, throughout the history of humankind, of the monstrous evil to which man can sink in the guise of the cultured and the civilized. Over two thousand years of contemplation of the Good could not tame the savage beast which lurks in the depths of the human. The philosopher has thus been proven impotent in healing the misery and decadence which characterize human existence. It is the horror of this naked fact, the urgency to understand it, and the passion to escape it, that underlies all good philosophy. The West has traditionally sought insight into these enigmas by way of a search for truth. What is the truth about the way man is...the glorious heights to which he can climb, the terrifying depths to which he can sink? We all seem to share certain human constants - the simple joy of a baby's smile, the sun on our faces, the warmth of a caress, compassion for the lost child and the grieving widow. Does this mean that we also share, at the depths of our souls, the depravity of the rapist, the treachery of the thief, the impassioned hatred of a Hitler? The deepest and most urgent question of philosophy is not the one which asks the origin of the universe or the disposition of the gods, but is the ethical question, the one which asks: What is it to be human? All other questions serve only to give light to this.

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[1]Emil Fackenheim. *To Mend The World*. New York: Schocken Books. 1982. p.266.

The Western tradition has tended overwhelmingly to approach this question from the ontological or the epistemological perspective, that is, in an attentiveness either to the structure of Being, or to the structure of knowing. In either case, the task of philosophy is seen to be the rooting out of being, of the meaning of what it is to be, in an effort to force that meaning to disclose itself, to make itself known. In the opinion of many contemporary European philosophers, it is this very search which has taken us astray. In the hybris of the great structures of thought which have been erected to serve this goal, the original sense of the ethical urgency of the philosophical task has been lost.

In Plato, the search for the Good was the search for the good in man, how to nurture its growth, how to attune the soul such that it could embody justice, and thus know moral and spiritual fulfilment and reach a state of *eudaemonia*. For Plato, Justice, the distinctively human virtue, lay at the heart of the happiness of man. The quest for that Good which constituted the good life underlay all human activity. The Good thus shone from beyond and gave essential meaning to Being.

However, as the Holocaust strikingly demonstrated, thousands of years of contemplating the Good and the Beautiful and the True have not served to order the human soul to that state of Justice to which it most happily and naturally belongs. The philosopher, compassionate physician of the human soul, is revealed to be impotent in healing the open wound of man's inhumanity to his fellow man, in rectifying the misery and the decadence which characterize human existence. It is the reality of this fact, the sheer "uselessness" of the philosopher of the Western tradition from the time of Socrates until the present, which has driven Emmanuel Levinas to a rethinking of philosophy itself, from its very roots.

The Holocaust is that event which marks indelibly the work of Levinas, permeating it with an agonizing sense of loss. Yet it is the miracle of this thinker's philosophy that it remains optimistic about the nature of man, even in its being set against this nocturnal backdrop. Emmanuel Levinas, by his own admission[2], stages a striking return to Platonism in his sense of the ethical urgency of the philosophical task, yet to a new Platonism which thinks the difference between Being, the Good beyond Being, and the Good beyond and between beings. Levinas insists that we, as philosophers upholding the ethical calling of physician to the soul in a suffering and decadent world, are faced with a stark choice. We must decide *between* the starry skies above (the ordered universe of Plato) and the moral law within. In Levinas, the ethical response is not a function of Being which gleans its meaning from the larger scheme of things, but, rather, it is a rupture in Being which bursts forth as absurdity itself, and yet, in so doing, renders meaning to all other moments of existence. Thus it is the moral, for Emmanuel Levinas, which grounds Being, and not, as the tradition has it, Being which grounds the moral.

The philosophies of Plato and Levinas mirror each other in fascinating and subtle ways. They are both far more pragmatic, more "in-the-world", than many have allowed. Both call urgently in ethical verse for attention to the Good as a means to bringing the Good into "*la vie concrete*". Both philosophies are refreshingly unfragmentizable, occupying a space wherein ethics, metaphysics and religion are organically linked in an attitude to life and an understanding of the complexity of the human. At the crossroads between the religious and the secular, the

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[2] *E. Levinas: Collected Philosophical Papers.* Alphonso Lingis, tr. Dordrecht: Kluwer Publishing. 1993. p.47, 177. See also: *Face to Face with Emmanuel Levinas.* Richard A. Cohen, ed. Albany: State University of New York Press. 1986. p.25. and *E.Levinas: Ethics and Infinity.* Richard A.Cohen, tr. Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press. 1985. p.116.

literary and the philosophic, each of these philosophies refuses to despair in the quest for the Good beyond Being and in man's ability to catch its traces, and each displays an unremitting belief in the intrinsic nobility of man, however rarely that may be encountered.

However, in many respects, Levinas' thought resembles Plato's only superficially, taking the Good much farther, into regions more radical, more risky, more frightening. Levinas goes where even a Plato dare not tread, into regions where the ideal reveals itself amidst the grotesque and the terrifying: the oppressive, the obsessive, the murderous.

Plato's philosophy, undeniably a philosophy of transcendence, has all too often been seen by critics as one that denies the value of this life here and now. However, this amounts to a mere caricature of the Platonic, as we hope to demonstrate, and one that does not render justice to the spirit of the Platonic quest. Is it a question of a careless reading...or a strictly literal one which does not permit the spirit of the thought to shine beyond the limitations of the words? Levinas, well aware of the limitations of the *logos*, reads Plato in a manner sympathetic to that thinker's project:

> The wonder which Plato put at the origin of philosophy is an astonishment before the natural and the intelligible. It is the very intelligibility of light that is astonishing; light is doubled up with night. The astonishment does not arise out of comparison with some order more natural than nature, but simply before intelligibility itself. Its strangeness is, we might say, due to its very reality, to the very fact there is existence. The questioning of Being is an experience of Being in its strangeness.[3]

Indeed, in so far as we may say that Plato is proposing anything at all beyond a healthy skepticism, whose humble stance would leave open a space for learning, we may say that his

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[3]E.Levinas. *Existence and existents*. A.Lingis, tr. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic. 1988. p.22.

"truth" is a truth for *this* world. This is not always the case with Levinas. There are moments of *Otherwise Than Being*, as the full implication of the moral response is exposed, that the reader is torn from the comfortable security of his armchair, staggered by the frightening possibilities raised, and overwhelmed with the terrifying realization that Levinas' is a "truth" for a world far better than this.

It is the intention of this work to consider the thought of Emmanuel Levinas with its radical new definition of human subjectivity and its highly problematic theory of Justice against the backdrop of that philosophy that can be considered the father of them all, the Platonic. In this way, we hope to demonstrate the strengths of the earlier system, the shortcomings which make necessary its rethinking, and Levinas' project of overcoming these failings. We hope to note as well, the problems inherent in the Levinasian system with its substitution of the Death Camp Guard for Philosopher-King as guide to the Good, its inversion of the structure of giving into the commandment to hospitality, and its positioning of Justice outside the moral realm.

II. Ethics as First Philosophy

It would be ludicrous to suggest that Plato was not giving primary attention to the ethical throughout his entire corpus. Marked as he was by the execution of his beloved Socrates by the city which was father to them all, Plato's turn from political ambition and poetic impulses toward the "more important matter" of philosophy must be seen as a move from the arena of "what is" to the realm of "what should be". This new course carries Plato on to his own unique search for the Good via metaphysical speculations about the nature of Being, fanciful constructions of ideal states, erotic visions of Love and Beauty, and artistic flights of philosophical drama and mythical fantasy. But the essential intention of the entire Platonic project remained ever one: the ethical. His attempts to understand the human were only ever attempts to discover where we go wrong, that we might find ourselves again directed toward the Good; they were only ever attempts to discover that peculiarly human virtue, Justice, and to ascertain how to bring that virtue to bear in the reality of our everyday lives.

The grounding of the ethical project in Truth was Plato's way of emphasizing the importance of good decision-making. The demand for the contemplative life was the call to leave behind the easy excuses of passion's blindness or ignorance's bliss, and enter the difficult but heroic quest for right action. The unexamined life, for Socrates and for Plato, was not worth living. However, the examination of ethical matters, the search for Goodness which required the testing of blind faith and unquestioned convention, was a risky enterprise and one that brought with it no guarantees of wealth, or glory or even physical safety, as had been demonstrated by Socrates' tragic fate. In the real world, the philosopher is "useless". He is a prophet of doom for

earthly values of glory, wealth, and position. Surrounded by the sophist and the tyrant, the philosopher stands unwelcome in a foreign land and speaks a strange and troubling language of ethical exigency, while the impressionable youth looks on in wonder. The search for the ethical truth is as foreign to the man on the street as the sophist's truth is foreign to the philosopher. The search for the better and more just life informed by wisdom and goodness became Plato's urgent quest.

By grounding ethics in Truth, Plato set the model that was to orient Western philosophy for thousands of years. This tendency is seen by many to culminate in the monumental structures of Hegelian Being wherein history decides the destiny of the human in a final judgement of its value and its meaning. The great "system" of consciousness as it unfolds in all its multiple dimensions is often seen by critics as threatening to swallow up the individual and rob him of his irreducible singularity. The individual and private meaning of that unique existence can be seen to derive its importance solely from its place in the whole schema, and can too easily be dismissed as a mere moment in truth's evolution, to be inevitably proven false in the larger view of things.

The emphasis upon consciousness takes a turn with Husserl toward its intentional structure as passions, emotions, contemplation, even eating, caressing, and hammering, are redefined as intentions and intrinsically interwoven in the fabric of what we think we know. Consciousness amounts then to a panoramic review of a *kosmos* of things encountered in a present, recalled from a past, and projected into a future. All that exists for humans, exists in consciousness, and thus reduces to a moment of the cogito. Levinas explains what phenomenology learns from Husserl:

> Through intentions, our presence in the world is across
> a distance...which can be traversed but remains a distance.[1]

In Heidegger, Being again emerges, as *physis*, the all-embracing source to which all beings owe their emergence to the fore. Human consciousness is rooted in its "being-there" as our very ways of existing presuppose our understanding of Being as the horizon of interwovenness against which all things are coming-to-be-passing-away. If Levinas' philosophy is meant to speak back to any *one* thinker, that one would be Heidegger. Levinas admits this openly:

> If at the beginning our reflections are in a large measure
> inspired by the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, where
> we find the consciousness of ontology and of the relation-
> ship which man sustains with Being, they are also governed
> by a profound need to leave the climate of that philosophy...[2]

What is particularly troubling in Heidegger is that Being becomes the ultimate universal since all beings, including nature, human, and gods, are posed as arising against that all-encompassing horizon. Furthermore, the central and all-mastering human ego is nakedly exposed in all its innocent/predatory presumption in *Being and Time*'s analysis of *Dasein*. In *Dasein*'s world, gods exist merely for the sake of men, other humans come into play only as fellows in a "falling" existence which evades authenticity. In anonymous communities, another human being is suspiciously akin to a tool, serving a use or supplying enjoyment as a moment of *Dasein*'s spiritual or material property. Small wonder there is anxiety at the heart of such existing! Levinas explains the Heideggerian error thus:

[1]*Existence and existents*. p.46.

[2]*Existence and existents*. p.19.

> In order to describe being-in-the-world, this German philosopher has appealed to an ontological finality, to which he subordinates objects in the world. Seeing objects as "material"--in the sense that we speak of "war material"--he has included them in the care for existing, which for him is the very putting of the ontological problem. But he has thereby failed to recognise the essentially secular nature of being in the world and the sincerity of intentions. Not every -thing that is given in the world is a tool.[3]

Levinas will show the fundamental flaws in this system in his redefinition of the human subject. We are not thrown, but we throw ourselves into existing, feasting on the very plenitude of the elements, thrusting ourselves in pure joy into the banquet of life in order to escape the anonymity of Being. Heidegger misses the essential element in everyday living: the sincerity with which it is taken up. Levinas assures us that the condemned man still drinks his glass of rum. To call it "falling" and "inauthentic" is to ignore the very sincerity which constitutes hunger and thirst. Furthermore, for Levinas, Heidegger misses the key component in the human psyche which permits the ethical encounter: the recognition that authentic existing is not something to be achieved alone in the solitary moments of contemplation of one's own death, but in the madness of a giving that fails to consider the dangers, risking one's life to postpone the death of the other. Where, in Heidegger's understanding of man, is there room for noble action? Man's nobility is a struggle to be won, a war to be waged against the brute within himself, a refusal to succumb to despair.

It is this decidedly Western and ontological model of the structure of things which Levinas questions fundamentally. It began with Plato's attempt to think all good things in terms of a perfection beyond the limitations of the finite. But it deteriorated into a power structure

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[3] *Existence and existents*. pp.42-43.

which fixed the Truth according to history and the consciousness of man. As an ethical model, the flaws only slowly became apparent, but they inevitably set the stage for a Fascism. Levinas insists that Ethics cannot be grounded *in* anything else. This makes it a secondary component whose importance is derived from its place in the whole. It is essential, for Levinas, that the ethical remain primary, and this he achieves, not by building yet another system whereby all may be fit together neatly, but by positing ethics as a rupture in Being, a catastrophe, a violent inversion of all that makes sense for the human. In this way, ethics is given the primordial ground which lends meaning and justification to all other moments of human life. Levinas explains the need for this inversion:

> A philosophy of power, ontology is, as first philosophy which does not call into question the same, a philosophy of injustice...[Tyranny's] origin lies back in the pagan "moods", in the enrootedness in the earth, in the adoration that enslaved men can devote to their masters. Being before the existent, ontology before metaphysics, is freedom (be it the freedom of theory) before justice.[4]

In this section of *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas demonstrates the fundamental problem with Western philosophy and the need to leave it behind. This he accomplishes through a redefinition of the human subject, showing the ethical to be planted at the very heart of the human, waiting only to be drawn forth in the other's moment of need. I am, *in moral fact*, my brother's keeper. But this fact is not rooted in a knowledge that has been forgotten, to be recovered through recollection of a past truth. Each new human encounter embodies a truth of its own, unique and singular, and is not to be explained by reference to some system or project outside itself.

Thus we may say that the philosophies of Plato and Levinas share this fundamental

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[4]E.Levinas. *Totality and Infinity*. Alfonso Lingis, tr. Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press. 1969. pp.46-47.

feature: the fact that Ethics is ever "first philosophy". That sense of the urgency of the ethical underlies all else, grows frantic at times, even oppressive (Plato's *Laws*, Levinas' *Otherwise Than Being*), but always remains fundamental to the philosophical project. In the *Gorgias* and the *Republic*, Plato struggles with the notions of force and persuasion in an effort to make sense of the task of bringing the human to a state of Justice in the individual soul, and in the city as soul writ large. As we shall see, Levinas never resorts to force *toward* the other, but admits to force *from* the other, revealing the frighteningly risky nature of doing the Good to all. A noble yet humble giving without limits can become a persecution unto death, "For all great things are precarious", as Plato tells us in the *Republic*[5]. Not all souls can be brought to a state of Justice, nor do they want to be[6], so Socrates will be executed over and over again precisely because of the "uselessness" of the philosopher and the utter absurdity of the philosophical task in the eyes of the common man. To protect our souls from the delusion of knowledge which waylays the philosophical quest and thwarts the ethical response, to safeguard it against enslavement to the sophist and to arm it against the paralyzing fear of the tyrant which can render it violently self-protective and inwardly-oriented, a noble humility must be cultivated. To approach a trace of the Good one must admit, with Socrates, that he does not know, that he cannot know. Plato will insist, with Socrates, that the search for knowledge of the ethical, despite its futility, is the essence of philosophy and a necessary ingredient in the good life. Man is bent upon tyranny until

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[5]*Republic* 6.497d. (*Plato: The Collected Dialogues*. E.Hamilton, H.Cairns, eds. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1963.)

[6]In the *Meno*, Meno showed himself to be arrogant and intransigent from the beginning. When he finally is shown that he has something to learn, he chooses to give up and ask Socrates what he thinks. See also Socrates' encounter with Anytus at *Meno* 90a-95a. Euthyphro also hurries off, having no more time to spend in the pursuit of the nature of piety at the closing of the *Euthyphro*.

he knows better. But Levinas will insist that goodness is not something to be learned, not a goal to be achieved, but a gift from without, an ambiguous gift of oppression and obsession, but a gift nevertheless.

III. The Drama of Human Subjectivity.

The Platonic corpus opens in the light of the impending death of the beloved Socrates, the Levinasian under the shadow of the Holocaust. One would expect that works arising out of such sombre horizons would necessarily be gloomy and marked essentially with despair of the human condition. Yet this is not the case with either philosopher. That is not to deny that, at times, the mood of the verse becomes less optimistic, more burdened with a sense of loss and sorrow than at others, but the view of man expressed in each philosophy remains amazingly positive.

In Plato, we are presented with a candid view of man at his best and his worst. He is depicted at his reflective and moral best in the person of Socrates who occupies central stage of nearly every dialogue, at his non-reflective best in the person of Cephalus, and at his worst with such characters as Thrasymachus and Callicles who represent force in the raw, the unashamed power of the tyrant.. The difference between these extremes of humankind can best be explained with reference to the Allegory of the Cave[1]. In this story in respect of education, man is shown to work his way through various stages of spiritual development from the complete enslavement brought on by ignorance, to the freedom and enlightenment born of the philosophical awareness of the Good. In this myth, man is never shown making a conscious choice to do evil; the blindness of ignorance is the cause of innocent error. The difference between men is revealed to be one of degree (of awareness), not of kind.

Men are pictured dwelling in a cave with its entrance opening into the sun. Within its

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[1]*Republic* 7.514 ff.

walls, they are fettered, their necks and legs chained from childhood so that they are unable to turn their heads. A fire burning from a height behind them at some distance casts strange shadows on the wall before them. Noises echo accompaniment to the shadow dance, then fall silent, in turn. The poor prisoner knows nothing of the reality beyond his shadowy world, nothing of the wonderous sun of truth shining beyond the cave's door. He lives a contented existence, it seems, knowing no better than this world of illusion. The messiah in the Platonic myth is the philosopher, who, though living a blissful life in the real world outside the cave, painfully makes his way back into the dark pit of illusion in order to save the others. These, though, prove to be comfortable in their ignorance, and do not want saving, and especially not by one who, in their world, appears the utter fool, stumbling in the darkness and speaking nonsense about other realities. They feel threatened and confused by the philosopher's efforts to free them, and they experience philosophy as a violent attack upon their secure and autonomous realm:

> And if...someone should drag him thence [out of the cave of ignorance] by force up the ascent which is rough and steep and not let him go before he had drawn him out into the light of the sun, do you not think that he would find it painful to be so haled along, and would chafe at it, and when he came out into the light, that his eyes would be filled with its beams so that he would not be able to see even one of the things that we call real? (*Republic* 7.515e- 516a)

Plato is also clear regarding the misunderstanding, the ridicule, and the danger faced by the philosopher in his interaction with the ignorant:

> Now if he [the philosopher] should be required to contend with these perpetual prisoners in "evaluating" these shadows while his vision was still dim and before his eyes were accustomed to the dark - and the time required for this habituation would not be very short- would he not provoke laughter, and would it not be said

> of him that he had returned from his journey aloft with his eyes ruined and that it was not worthwhile even to attempt the ascent? And if it were possible to lay hands on and to kill the man who tried to release them and lead them up, would they not kill him? (*Republic* 7.517a)

Although the violent stance of the common man is not in the least masked in this passage, the Socratic claim that man never knowingly does harm is clearly a larger presupposition underlying this myth. This truth claim is one of the few to which Socrates ever admits in a lifetime of "knowing nothing". It explains Socrates' life and the quest for goodness to which he dedicated it; it explains Socrates' death and his refusal to lie or run away to save his body. Yet it does so in a manner sympathetic to man. Man is ever innocent. His memory simply fails him and he is not able to remember what the Good looks like.

Plato will offer a myriad of descriptions of the human soul throughout his corpus. So many, in fact, that we may say that contradictions as to its essential nature abound. In the *Phaedo*, the Pythagorean doctrine of the soul as a kind of harmony is refuted, while in the *Timaeus* this very doctrine is reinstated. In the *Phaedo*, the Platonic view of the human soul moves from mere "breath of life" in the first and final "proofs" of immortality (Cyclical Argument at 69e -72a and Causality Argument at 102a -107b) to personal moral and intellectual principle in the middle two proofs (Argument from Recollection at 72e -78b and Argument from Kinship at 78b -84b). The soul ceases to hold its kinship to the forms as it splits into three parts in the *Phaedrus* (246a ff.) and again in the *Republic* (434d ff.) as Plato admits that the soul is far more complex than a simple mind/body dichotomy could portray. However, it regains its essential simplicity later in that same dialogue (*Republic* 10.611a ff.) Yet again, (at *Phaedrus* 245c -246a), the soul is made principle of movement and change as Orphic *psyche* and Ionian

physis unite in another understanding of the soul. Yet in all these depictions, the essence of man is ever innocence, though the confusion and complexity of passions and emotions may blind him and cause him to stumble morally. Never does Socrates refuse to search for the Good with anyone willing to join him. Never does he despair of man altogether though at times he grows more hopeful of his salvation, at others less.

In the thought of Emmanuel Levinas, this same remarkably optimistic view of man persists; in fact, evil and error are explained away even more sympathetically than they are in Plato. It is astounding that, writing in the wake of the Holocaust as Levinas does, he still is able to maintain that the natural drives and feelings of the human subject on its way to moral and spiritual fulfilment comprise valuable guides to the Good and the Glorious.

Let us consider the drama of the unfolding of human subjectivity in the thought of Levinas to observe how this positive view of man is explained. Levinas posits confusion and anxiety at the heart of innocent error:

> Anxiety is the cutting point at the heart of evil. Sickness, evil in living, aging, corruptible flesh, perishing and rotting, would be the modalities of anxiety itself; through them and in them dying is at it were lived, and the truth of this is unforgettable, unimpeachable, irremissible.[2]

In an early work entitled *Existence and existents*,[3] Levinas explains that from the "instant" in which the existent erupts from the field of Being-in-general, he is overwhelmed by feelings of *aporia*, helplessness and dread. With the birth of consciousness, fear and need, stemming from the existent's inability to understand his own being in relation to Being-in-general, are the shapes

[2]"Transcendence and Evil". *Collected Philosophical Papers*. pp.175-186. p.179.

[3]See note 4.

that this confusion assumes. Felt as *self*-propulsion, the being's eruption into existence represents to him a "polarization of Being-in-general"[4], providing the event of the genuinely new in a free act of his own creation, a self-fashioned project. Yet it is a project which cannot be readily grasped and assimilated into consciousness, so it remains a source of anxiety.

Furthermore, the instant of eruption represents not only the freedom of a genuinely new creation, but simultaneously the event of finitude, a stifling awareness that one's freedom and future survival are only ever secured one moment at a time. The fear and need thus engendered result in a problematic state of clinging to Being which only exacerbates anxiety. Levinas explains:

> The belongingness to being is in fact not a rest in a harbour of peace; the dialectic of being and nothingness within essence is an anxiety over nothingness and a struggle for existence.[5]

The existent is thus trapped between the need to cling to Being, the faceless unchanging, that Being without beings which Levinas will term the *il y a*, and the need to move forward...unto Death. These two walls of his prison are experienced as horror[6]: horror of the unknown mystery that is Death, horror of the *il y a* which is endless meaningless existence. That horror stifles existence.

In horror, a subject is stripped of his subjectivity, of

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[4]*Existence and existents. p.18.*

[5]E.Levinas. *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence.* Alfonso Lingis, tr. Dordrecht: Kluwer Publishers. 1991. p.176.

[6]In *Existence and existents*, Levinas describes the *il y a* thus: "the rustling of the there is...is horror...it insinuates itself in the night as an undetermined menace of space itself disengaged from its function as receptacle for objects, as a means of access to beings." (p.60.) In *Ethics and Infinity*, Levinas explains that this image came to him from recollection of childhood memories, being shut in bed alone, while adults went on with their lives in the world beyond the oppressive and "buzzing" silence of his dark room. (p.48.) For horror, see also *Otherwise Than Being.* p.176.

> his power to have private experience.[7]

It is interesting to note that, for Levinas, the fear of eternal life is as original as the fear of Death, and that both, at bottom, amount to a fear of the unknown, the unknowable. It is the horror in the face of the endless buzzing night of Being which Levinas substitutes for the blissful wonder of intelligible, luminous Being which Plato places at the origin of philosophy.

In an effort to escape the ontological prison of horrors, then, the existent throws himself into life as into a bacchanalian feast, drawing into his being the very elements which surround him. Levinas posits eating as the example *par excellence* of the existent's frenzied enjoyment of existence. Eating is not undertaken merely to ward off Death but constitutes the very act of living. Here intention and consciousness of otherness combine in a mode of living which reduces to assimilation. In food, form and content are entirely adequate to each other leaving no remainder. I live my food, it is taken in and becomes me, it feeds my life.

> Eating...is peaceful and simple; it fully realizes its sincere intention: "The man who is eating is the most just of men".[8]

and again:

> To be sure, in the satisfaction of need, the alienness of the world loses its alterity; in satiety the real I sank my teeth into is assimil -ated, the forces that were in the other become *my* forces, become me.[9]

This sincere devouring describes the nature of the existent's relationship with his world, with other beings. Enjoyment is the ultimate relation with the substantial plenitude of Being, achieved

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[7] *Existence and existents. p.61.*

[8] *Existence and existents. p.44.*

[9] *Totality and Infinity. p.129.*

through a knowing which is a devouring. As beings are extracted from the anonymous elemental, each is grasped and assigned an identity which gives it meaning through limits, an appointed form, a use and a belongingness. The gods of nature are thus deposed, and an order imposed. In this manner, the ego establishes himself as a separate being, with an identity and a history of his own outside of the suffocating and anonymous totality of Being. He gathers about himself all the necessities for his joyful survival: "good soup, air, light, spectacles, work, sleep, etc."[10] and these things, extracted from the elemental in which man is steeped, gain new meaning as his "domicile".

> Man has overcome the elements only by surmounting [his immersion therein]...which confers upon him an extraterritoriality. He gets a foothold in the elemental by a side already appropriated: a field cultivated by me, the sea in which I fish and moor my boats, the forest in which I cut wood; and all these acts, all this labour, refer to the domicile. Man plunges into the elemental from the domicile.[11]

Thus Levinas shows that all predatory acts of man reduce to the sincerity of enjoyment and the innocence of *conatus essendi*. This "heroic existence" of the separated being is his natural mode of positing himself as unique and singular, a valiant refusal to be just another nameless face in the human crowd. The creature's unshakeable belief in his own self-sufficiency, a kind of natural atheism, Levinas refers to the greatness of the creator:

> It is certainly a great glory for the creator to have set up a being capable of atheism, a being which, without having been *causa sui*, has an independent view and word and is at home with himself.[12]

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[10] *Totality and Infinity. p.131.*

[11] *Totality and Infinity. p.131.*

[12] *Totality and Infinity. p.58-59.*

This being-at-home-with-oneself is a safe house against the anonymity of the elemental, against the buzzing of the *il y a*, and against the threat of immediate Death, and, Levinas insists, it is absolutely essential to the healthy development of the human subject on his way to moral and spiritual fulfilment. Only the secure, self-satisfied, atheistic ego who needs, thinks, manipulates, and devours his everyday world, enjoys and feels free, can overcome the fear which turns him inward. Only thus can he prepare himself to face the unknown and welcome the call of the needy other. This is achieved when his safe house reveals itself to be just another prison. Man shut up inside his domicile cannot escape, cannot truly know the other; each attempt at knowing is always a return to the self. Its freedoms, so essential for the establishing of singular and unique identity, turn out to be finite, its solidarity inescapable. The ego yearns for true alterity; then and only then is he able to experience Desire.

> Having recognized its needs as material needs, as capable of being satisfied, the I can henceforth turn to what it does not lack. It distinguishes the material from the spiritual, opens to Desire.[13]

It is only in Desire, for Levinas, that the falsity of the ontological realm is revealed. To be fully free and human, "one must not be posed but deposed"[14]. Where need is a movement of interiority, a descent inside oneself to establish an individual identity and secure one's own truths, Desire is a (non-)relationship with "height", with utter alterity and irreducible mystery; it is an abandonment of one's immediate truths in a longing for a higher realm where truth becomes the property of the other.

[13] *Totality and Infinity. p.117.*

[14] *Ethics and Infinity. p.52.*

Despite the clear denial that *Eros* is lack[15], strong Platonic influence can be read in Levinas' view of Desire. As a sympathetic reading[16] of the *Symposium* will show, there are close parallels between that dialogue and *Totality and Infinity*. In both works, Desire is that force which acts as mediator between the human and the divine. In neither does *Eros* represent a return to the self; it is a movement toward the future which lives out man's wish for transcendence of the merely finite. In both, it is the ardent wondrous Desire for the other which serves as the invitation to transcend one's constricted loyalties, an erotic summons to break through the narrow bounds of one's merely physical and self-centred existence, and to produce results which are, as far as is humanly possible, boundless and infinite. As Luce Irigaray points out[17] in her reflections on the *Symposium*, the ladder of love confirms:

> the character of divine generation in any union...the presence of immortality in the living mortal. All love is seen as creation and potentially divine, a path between the mortal and that of the immortal. Love is fecund *prior to* any procreation.[18]

Platonic *Eros* and Levinasian fecundity meet in the acknowledgement that love seeks generation toward immortality. Love's creations represent a kind of proof of the father's presence in the son,

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[15]Traditional scholarship tends to depict Platonic love as a function of lack, emphasizing *Eros*' mother's identity as *Penia* (need or indigence). Irigaray follows in this tradition (*An Ethics of Sexual Difference*. Carolyn Burke & Gillian Gill, tr. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. 1993. pp.20-33.) when she declares that Love is a philosopher through his mother, a barefoot waif, poor, dirty and unhoused (p.24). However, it must be remembered that *Eros* isthe descendent of both the mother and the father, *Poros* (cunning, resource, plenitude). Yet it was the mother's cunning and resoucefulness which led to his conception, since she outwitted *Poros* when she lay with him in his drunken stupor. The play between these two opposites here might better be read as an admission by Plato that Desire's need is a fullness which cannot be satiated but grows in passion with each fulfilment.

[16]See esp. Martha Nussbaum. *The Fragility of Goodness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1986. pp.165-199. Also G.R.F.Ferrari. "Platonic Love". *Cambridge Companion to Plato*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1992. pp.248-276.

[17]Luce Irigaray. *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*. pp. 25-26.

[18]Emphasis is mine.

yet that presence is an ambiguous one, a "logical paradox" [19] of the future of *Poros* lived out in *Eros*. Levinas describes this fecundity as "a rupture of continuity, and a continuation across this rupture"[20]. The *Symposium* witnesses[21] the indigence in the wealth of human desire, and the insufficiency in self-sufficiency; true *Eros* seeks not to fill itself but reach beyond itself and to give birth upon the Infinite. Levinas calls Desire[22] the metaphysical movement of Goodness itself.

It is through Desire, then, in *Totality and Infinity*, that the subject opens up to the other and is called to a shame of his preditory arts. The infinity in the face of the other pulls him up short, revealing to him the violence of the ontological adventure.

> To approach the Other is to put into question my freedom,
> my spontaneity as a living being, my emprise over things...
> the face in which the other is produced submits my freedom
> to judgement.[23]

Putting my freedom into question has always been the task of a worthy ethics. The Greeks attempted to do this with Truth, the Hebrews with Justice, but Levinas insists that the Good be grounded at some deeper level that cannot be reduced to objective cognition. He explains:

> To identify the problem of foundation with the knowledge of
> knowledge is to forget the arbitrariness of freedom, which is

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[19] *Ethics and Infinity. p.62.*

[20] *Totality and Infinity. p.284.*

[21] In rejecting the myth of androgenous being, does Plato not confirm the non-nostalgic nature of *Eros*? *Symposium* 189d-193d, 203b, 205d, 206a. See also *Totality and Infinity*. pp.63, 114-115.

[22] We note that Levinas is careful to avoid the use of the word "love" in his descriptions of the human encounter. He explains this avoidance in *Ethics and Infinity*: "I distrust the compromised word "love". (p.52.)

[23] *Totality and Infinity. p.85.*

> precisely what has to be grounded.[24]

In *Totality and Infinity*, the moral dimension opens to the human subject as Bad Conscience and as the overwhelming longing to bestow the world I possess upon the needy stranger. In so doing, the moral response permits a grounding of the ego's freedom, since Goodness without hands or material goods is empty, while spiritual beneficence cannot feed the hungry. The justification of hedonism cannot lie in the existence of one's own needs, but in those of others. Adriaan Peperzak puts this succinctly:

> ...legitimation of egocentric hedonism is not absolute but relative. If it does not submit itself to a higher law, it loses its innocence.[25]

Only in the good human encounter, then, do I justify my war against the external in the humble act of a peace sign to the other. The "me voici" is religious dialogue, a spiritual offering of a listening ear which tempers, nay eclipses, the devouring mouth. To be sure, this offering is depicted as a rupture in the realm of identity: a rupture of its time and space, a learning. It is the movement from convexity to concavity which opens up the human. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas calls this rupture "a delightful lapse of the ontological", a "going beyond being", and a "going beyond death", the means by which the I is conserved in Goodness, friendship, hospitality. However, in the darker mood of *Otherwise Than Being*, the full implications of this offering become apparent, and the potentially violent nature of the moral event is disclosed. Here, Desire is conspicuous in its absence, and, instead, I am depicted as summoned to the event of my own execution. The "delightful lapse" darkens to a "shock" , a "persecution". The full

[24]*Totality and Infinity. p.85.*

[25]Adriaan Peperzak. *To the Other*. West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press. 1993. p.24.

extent of the vulnerability to which Goodness exposes me is laid bare and the paradox of its weighty glory is revealed as my persecutor takes me hostage against my will, burdens me beyond my capabilities, possesses me, obsesses me. I am called to take responsibility for the other even unto responsibility for his irresponsibility toward me.

It seems that between the two works, *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise Than Being*, it occurs to Levinas that the host, in actively welcoming the widow, the orphan and the alien, was not passive enough, still retained enough of the egotistical freedom which would permit him to escape from the threatening stranger, or to judge the worthiness or unworthiness of the needy. No, in order to present the highest possible ideal, the ultimate sacrifice must be possible. In order to catch the trace of the divine, Levinas will say, one must be prepared to give the infinite response, to sacrifice all that one is and has, to offer oneself as holy sacrifice to the most radical of evil. Levinas paints a sombre picture of the moral assignment, as the joyful ego is crushed under the weight of a shame that it cannot bear, an inadequacy which cannot serve as a reprieve, an obsession which does not permit a turning away. Here, he is careful not to "sell us" on the benefits of the moral response. It is a rape and a murder by the other and we are the willing victims.

IV. A Thoughtful Justice.

It is clear from the above that both Plato and Levinas view man very sympathetically. It is also true that evil takes on, in both philosophies, a mercurial existence, somewhere between ignorance and innocence. This bare fact makes a meaningful conception of Justice highly problematic. The *Republic*, though centred about the question of Justice, is probably Plato's most ruthlessly criticized work. In many important respects, it contradicts arch-Platonic principles of Goodness, and denies that very essential freedom which allows the individual to choose the Good for its own sake. Similarly, for Levinas, the separation of the realm of Justice from the moral sphere creates profound difficulties for the practical application of that philosophy. Furthermore, in positioning the moral outside of self-critical reflection, he exhausts all possibility of thoughtful moral choice as just action toward the other. Thus we will approach a careful analysis of the concept of Justice as it is presented by each of these thinkers, in an effort to expose the problems of each, and to uncover some possible solutions to those problems.

In Plato, truth is sought as a means to guide the individual to a self-limiting of his freedoms in order to know the happiness of the good life dedicated to right action. Plato chose throughout his dialogues to hail his friend and spiritual master, Socrates, as the embodiment of that ideal. Here, we may secure the aid of Hegel in understanding how Socrates attempted to realize that ideal in his own life and in others'. In Hegel's *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*[1], he explains how Socrates' life witnesses the possibility of an entirely individual ethics which, though passionately individual, remains socially responsible. In his own day as much as today,

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[1]G.W.F.Hegel. *Hegel's Lectures on the History of Philosophy*. E.S.Haldane & F.H.Simson, tr. New York: Humanities Press. 1974.

Socrates has often been deeply misunderstood as an egocentric isolationist unconcerned with his fellow man, but Hegel demonstrates that his life as ethical quest embodies the solution to the problem of egocentric Desire as a guide to human action.

Hegel hails Socrates as "a most important figure in the history of philosophy...perhaps the most interesting in the philosophy of antiquity"[2]. Previous to Socrates, the Greeks had an "ethical life" founded upon divinely given truths; their serene assurance in the validity and self-evidence of the "natural harmony" of Greek life made it inimical to self-reflection. As long as they followed the old patterns of action inherent in *nomos*, performing the sacred rites and rituals with a blind faith, the Socratic quest could not fit into their understanding of themselves or their world. Hegel sees Socrates as the turning point to moral thought and healthy desire since he introduces a self-critical awareness into the individual Greek life. Hegel explains:

> The moral person is not merely the person who wills and does the moral right, not the innocent person, but he who has the consciousness of his action.[3]

To Hegel, the Socratic move to moral self-awareness embodies the ambiguous unity of dialectic and sophistry, or, we might say, represents the meeting point of the objective (as objective universal or the ordered harmonious Greek *kosmos*) and the individual (as the contingent lawless or egocentric and desire-driven will). In the real existence of Socrates, these two opposites are wed as the universal "I". Socrates merges *nous*, the determining and ruling principle of Anaxagoras' universe, with the rest, security and mathematical perfection and logical purity of

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[2]*Hegel's Lectures*. p.384.

[3]G.W.F.Hegel. *Werke in zwanzig Banden*, 12. Eva Moldenhauer, Karl Markus Michael, eds. Frankfurt: Suhr Verlag. 1971. p.329. cited in Terry Pinkard. *Hegel's Phenomenology: The Sociality of Reason*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1994. p.423 n.34.

Parmenidean Being, then relocates it within the individual as self-conscious thought. In order for man to esteem the Good as substantial end, Socrates recognized that it must be known. Thus, in the Socratic quest for the Good, the infinite subjectivity of the individual bursts forth into true freedom as self-conscious thought about the universal objective, the Good. Hegel states:

> True thought thinks in such a way that its import is as truly objective as it is subjective.[4]

Truth is encountered, in the free act of understanding, as no mere external objectivity, but as a product mediated through and directly accessible to thought. Hegel notes that this is a profound turning point over earlier "untrained morality" defined as universal in the form of the external law of the gods, in blind devotion to which, Sophocles has Antigone say (vers. 454-457): "And no one knew from whence it came".

Socrates is exemplary as the synthesis of action and self-conscious thought, to use Hegel's terms, or the synthesis of violent egoistic freedom and the madness of divine substitution, to use Levinasian terminology. His philosophy is no withdrawal into the etherial regions of pure reflection but is one with his life, and actually affords to his life an inward connection with ordinary existence, for that life was one of philosophic social intercourse with ordinary Athenians in all walks of life, chatting in the marketplace and exercising in the public Lyceum. Socrates accepted the universal Good only in the particular significance of the practical: how to live better here and now. This entirely concrete quest for the Good kept the now of his present life meaningful and stable, and yet prevented it from closing in on itself, by directing it, through a reflection on the past, toward the promise of a better future. In so doing, a

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[4]*Hegel's Lectures*. p.386.

dimension of mystery and wonder was injected into that life which gave it a quality that far exceeded the marketplace mentality of his fellow Athenians. In this mysterious connection with the divine, Socrates escapes the hypostasis of Levinas' egoistic "I" which is imprisonment to itself.

> The present refers only to itself, but this reference, which should have dazzled it with freedom, imprisons it in an identification. The present, free with respect to the past, but a captive of itself, breathes the gravity of being...[5]

For Socrates, the law of the present must not be broken (*Crito*) but it is not the last word; it must always be questioned, altered by argument and mutual consent (*Sophist* 143, 146 ff.), and referred to the Good. Since Justice is that virtue which is distinctively human, our understanding of that virtue is crucial to the grounding of a human ethic. Let us consider Plato's *Gorgias*, which in many respects can be said to establish a sense of ethical urgency which sets the philosophical stage for the *Republic* and its definition of Justice.

Plato insists that the Good can be known and that the search thereafter, the philosophical quest, is the true business of life. However, sophists, tyrants, and the "great beast" of the world at large waylay us in that quest and cloud our minds to the truth. In the *Gorgias*, and again in the *Republic*, Plato demonstrates the difficulty of the philosophical task in the setting of 5th century Athens and the urgency of its call given the effect of that milieu on the impressionable youths, so bright and yet, without proper education, so dangerous[6].

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[5]E.Levinas. *Existence and existents. p.79.*

[6]It is an overriding and urgent theme of both the *Gorgias* and the *Republic* that the brightest young men are the greatest danger when not educated properly. Thus we must compel the best natures to attain knowledge and to win the vision of the Good. Witness *Republic* 6.492 "The nature which we assumed in the philosopher, if it receives the proper teaching must needs grow and attain to consummate excellence, but if it be sown and planted and grown in the wrong environment, the outcome will be quite the contrary, unless some god comes to the rescue." See also *Republic*

The traditional Greek understanding of man's responsibility to his fellow man was founded in the democratic ideal of equality between citizens, but had its roots far deeper in Greek soil than the politics of an individual state. In the Greek myths concerning the origin of the divine and the human, life as a balance between opposing forces was inherent in the structure of things. Might ruled in Hesiod's *Theogony*[7] as generation after generation of fathers suppressed sons in a struggle to the death over raw power. Early ancestors of gods and men were monstrous and devious, ugly in shape and terrifying in demeanor. "Strength and force and contriving skills were in all their labours" ((line 146) and "secret ambushes" and "shameful dealings" characterized their actions. That prehistory of ruthlessness and treachery culminates in the ultimate act of atrocity with the violent castration of Father Ouranos by his son, Kronos.

> ...and from his hiding place his son
> reached with his left hand
> and seized him [Ouranos] in his right
> the enormous sickle
> with its long blade-edged teeth
> he swung it sharply,
> and lopped the members of his own father,
> and threw them behind him
> to fall where they would...(lines 178-182)

Might is right, in the prehistory of the universe, brought to a trembling truce only in order to secure a moment to enjoy the trappings of the victory, a compromise grounded in another mode of self-interest. With the advent of Zeus, order is brought to the heavens. He knows the value of political prowess, forming alliances with his ancestry to secure peace for the heavens. But this

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6.495b, 6.497b, 7.519cd.

[7]*Hesiod: The Works and Days, Theogony, The Shield of Herakles*. Richard Lattimore, tr. University of Michigan Press. 1991. pp.119-186.

peace is a precarious one for gods and men, since their fundamental nature is violent and power-hungry, and even the great Zeus does not have the final word. The four moral norms, *Ananke* (Necessity), *Dike* (Justice), *Moira* (Fate), and *Tukhe* (Chance) hold ultimate sway and not even Zeus can alter their edicts. Thus fragility and contingency characterize all that is both divine and human. Violence is inherent in all things and is an integral feature of *physis*.

This worldview is born out in the fragments of many of the earliest Greek philosophers. Heraclitus used the image of the strung bow to depict the struggle of, not mere opposing forces, but *enantia*, warring opponents which grapple unto death. In fact, Kirk and Raven state that the "war which underlies all events...is called *dike*, the 'indicated way' or the normal rule of behaviour".[8] We must recall here that *dike* is the Greek word for Justice as well.

The Greek understanding of the way of things, then, speaks of a natural war inherent in *physis*, which is only kept in balance by a kind of reasoned communal effort aimed at a curbing of individual violence in an effort to postpone thoroughgoing war of all against all. This view of Justice as grounded in the common good forms the essence of the non-philosopher's worldview which Plato presents both in the *Gorgias* and later in the *Republic*. It underpins the *Republic*'s claim (at 6.500c) "Reason bids us to abide in harmony".

In the *Gorgias*, the implications of this view are exposed in ascending order of fragility and descending order of moral worth with the portraits of the Sophists: first with Gorgias, then with Polus, finally with Callicles. Gorgias, a Sophist, is a decent enough fellow, yet his unabashed refusal of responsibility for the effects of his actions shocks the reader. Polus is merely a young fool but he shamelessly proclaims that the greatest good for mankind is power,

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[8]G.S.Kirk & J.E.Raven. *The Presocratic Philosophers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1957. p.195.

and he stands firm in the belief that the tyrant is the happiest of men. Finally, Plato exposes the frightening implications of such a view in the hands of an altogether immoral and predatory character, Callicles. This tyrannical image is all the more disturbing when we recall that this same Callicles will soon have the occasion to prove his "truths" as a member of the infamous "Thirty Tyrants", puppets of Sparta who terrorized and disgraced the name of Athens by its cruel and avaricious treatment of foreigner and Athenian citizen alike.

The Sophists are shown to share certain basic traits despite this wide variance in their personal characters. It becomes increasingly clear as the dialogue progresses, that a Sophist may happen upon, but does not require, a good moral character in order to be good at what he does. The Sophists pride themselves on the winning of arguments through persuasion and this is, in fact, better accomplished without the constraints of moral preoccupations. Furthermore, Socrates draws from them the stunning admission that they require no substantive knowledge of anything whatsoever, neither of right nor wrong, justice or injustice; theirs is a mere *techne* which teaches the art of manipulation of an audience, and this *techne* is amoral in character. *Techne*, as understood by the non-philosopher, is content-indifferent and amoral, thus can be harnessed to any purpose. "The rhetorician is incapable of making a wrong use of rhetoric" (5.461a).

However, it is also clear that this is not merely a harmless pastime; this is a dangerous art! It is the exercise of power in Athenian society. The Sophist operates in the legal (Gorgias) and political (Callicles) arena, and the future of Athens (Polus) hangs in the balance. There is power in words, this becomes clear, and this is a power dangerous to the soul! The implications of the situation exposed in this dialogue are stunningly clear. Totalitarian systems, nightsticks, prison camps, S.S.Guards are not dangerous to our souls, but a Hitler is. Hitler uses words; well-

developed ideologies are important to such regimes. The ultimate power lies in corrupting the souls of the best[9]and words purchase this power.

The urgency of this situation is made clear by Plato's portrait of Socrates here. In this dialogue, he is very different from the Socrates we normally encounter in Plato's dialogues. Normally Socrates appears as the teacher, activating the learner's own powers of understanding and recall of the Good, respecting the autonomy of the other, guiding and aiding the student lovingly toward a private conversion. Here, however, he orates, he preaches, he uses every trick of flattery and persuasion. He speaks collectively, before an audience, becoming greatly heated at many points. A sense of moral urgency bordering on sheer panic is felt by the reader at moments in the discussion. This rises to a fevered pitch as the dialogue reaches the frightening discovery that the Sophist is an unprincipled, unknowing persuader who simply *cannot* steer society toward the Good. Gorgias thinks he knows what goodness is and is going to teach it to all who will listen. The youth carried away with the conceit of knowledge will teach his opinion with megalomaniacal verve. Overwhelmingly, the topic returns to power: boasting about power, proud of the ability to out-persuade doctors in their own field. The love for power is exposed as an unholy fascination, revered as a value in itself. When raw power is seen as a good in itself, the stage is set for a deep human corruption. This corruption is openly displayed in the character of Callicles. In his long oration at 5.482c ff., he reasserts the *physis-nomos* dichotomy, explaining that nature and convention are antagonistic to each other. Justice, it seems to the non-philosopher, is never going to be natural. By nature, all suffering is shameful, but by convention it is more shameful to inflict suffering. This, he explains, is because laws, "tiresome popular

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[9]See note 40.

fallacies", are framed by the weaker folk, the majority, instead of the true natural rulers, the mighty. But nature herself makes it undeniably clear, he insists, that it is right for the better to have the advantage over the worse, the more able over the less. Human nature is thus naturally corrupt; to strive for self-advantage is merely to follow one's instincts, and, for this end, injustice is instrumental. In a terrifying prophecy of things to come in the Athenian state, things to which he himself will be a party, he states:

> We mold the best and strongest among ourselves, catching them young like lion cubs, and by spells and incantations we make slaves of them, saying they must be content with equality and that this is what is right and fair. But if a man arises endowed with a nature sufficiently strong, he will, I believe, shake off all these controls, burst his fetters and break loose. And trampling upon our scraps of paper, our spells and incantations, and all our unnatural conventions, he rises up and reveals himself our master who was once our slave, and there shines forth nature's true justice. (483e ff.)

The allusion to the laws as "spells and incantations" which conceal the truth about man's nature and manipulate the powerless, only serves to remind the reader that this is the very art of Sophistry under description here. Callicles continues his oration to the unscrupulous with a reminder to Socrates that it is both ridiculous and dangerous to continue to practise philosophy as more than a boyhood pastime. He warns:

> For now if anyone should seize you or any others like you and drag you off to prison, claiming you are guilty when you are not, you realize that you would not know what to do, but you would reel to and fro and gape openmouthed, without a word to say, and when you came before the court, even with a mean and utterly rascally accuser, you would be put to death if he chose to demand the death penalty. [10]

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[10] *Gorgias* 486ab. c.f. 521cd, 522b ff.

Callicles' speech is a frank diagnosis of power as it is exercised in actual societies in the absence of the quest for the Good. The search for goodness is, in essence, the knowledge of ends, the focus upon a goal outside oneself. In the absence of a knowledge of ends, the means will take over. The downward spiral from a Gorgias to a Callicles is an inevitable collapse of the moral, a collapse into the sub-human. As power becomes the end in itself, the power-seeker can justify the most radical evil as "reasons of state". To the Sophist, might is right; to the tyrant, power is inevitable and desired by all.

It becomes clear that the difference between Justice and injustice is dimly discerned in the cave below. This is what it is to have an unexamined life, overrun by inherent beastliness[11], a nightmarish existence which pits all against all. There are no alliances in the animal kingdom. Even a tyrant recognizes that law is brought in as a contract to safeguard ourselves against our own natures. What is at stake is frighteningly clear: the natural thirst for power must be handled in order that Justice might reign, and Plato must go on to consider the various ways in which this might be accomplished. The significance of the *Gorgias* lies precisely in this: it asks what is the philosopher's responsibility. Standing in the light of the Good outside the cave, the philosopher knows that the way back to darkness is not the road to care of his own soul, but it is the price of his moral awareness. He is the only one who has even a vague vision of the Good, the only one who can bring light to the shadowy world in the cave below. Given the stark realities revealed in the *Gorgias*, can the philosopher be content to leave the political and social scene to those without a love of wisdom? The move from a Socrates who teaches and guides one listener at a time with respect for the opinions and readiness of the other, to a Socrates who orates, pleads

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[11] *Republic* 9.588c ff.

and persuades, dramatizes the two stark choices for the philosopher. He can withdraw from the world at large, teaching one at a time in an open academy for princes, or he can take the power from the Sophist and, through persuasion wherever possible, force where not, he can direct society toward the Good.

There is every reason for us to believe that the *Republic* opens at precisely this point. The search for Justice, and the construction of the ideal state are undertaken in response to the requests of Glaucon and Adimantus, two young men who have just been listening to a discussion in which Socrates had stated that the just man, not the unjust, is the happy man[12]. This dialogue admits of some extraordinary features. Socrates narrates in the first person and remains the central figure throughout. It is narrated the day after its occurrence, lending authenticity and immediacy to the account, rendering it powerful, personal, and deeply focused. Thrasymachus' position is highly reminiscent of Callicles', and at the same time, represents fairly faithfully the public sentiment of the polis at that moment. Athens is clearly in a state of decline, and the mood of anxious desperation of the *Gorgias* bleeds over into this dialogue. The subject of Justice is reframed from a merely individual question into the search for how the good life in general should be lived, both individually and collectively in the context of the polis.

Despite the ostensibly light-hearted opening of the dialogue, which finds Socrates accosted by loving friends in a happenchance meeting at a festival, there yet reigns an air of anxious desperation; the overriding philosophical theme of the dialogue, Force versus Persuasion, is immediately staged in the literary. The interplay between these two forces immediately intrudes into the festive milieu and darkens the friendly jousting of the young men

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[12]See *Gorgias* 470e. Thus 262c.

with Socrates (1.327c). "But can you see how many we are?" asks Polemarchus, "You must either then prove yourselves the better men or stay here." To this Socrates responds: "Why, is it not left the alternative of our *persuading* you that you *ought* to let us go?" (emphasis mine). In the mock-force which the young friends apply to the beloved Socrates, the deep truth of the question of Force versus Persuasion surfaces. "But could you persuade us if we refused to listen?" This is the nutshell of the problem of the philosopher and the tyrant. Can Socrates convince a Callicles without himself resorting to force? Can Callicles persuade a Socrates or will he be forced to kill him?

The meeting with Cephalus in Book I serves to demonstrate the decline of the conventional social foundations of Athens, and the flaws inherent in that foundation, and to reveal the need for a more reflective grounding for an ethic. The old man is shown to be wise, pious, just, dutiful and happy. He thus serves as a solid model of traditional virtue, a man who could be trusted with power. Could this be a possible alternative to the tyrant or the philosopher-king? As the conversation between Cephalus and Socrates develops, problems in an authority-based ethic become apparent, and it is clear that even the best conventional man is not good enough. To begin with, Cephalus is smug, boasting that he is not in debt to any man. He has escaped the servitude to the bodily passions, but clearly only through the blessings of old age, and not through a reflective self-control. He calls in the aid of the poets and the tragedians to bolster his opinions, but then, so does Callicles[13]. The old man's piety is revealed to be a "commercial racket" as it was for Euthyphro in the dialogue of that name. Cephalus sees the

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[13]Callicles quotes Pindar (fr.169) at *Gorgias* 484b: "Law is the sovereign of all, Of mortals and immortals alike, Carries all, justifying the most violent deed, With victorious hand..."

value of wealth to lie in the purchase power of favour from the gods. The rich, by implication, can sin far more than the poor. Gods and men thus become trading partners, and, among fellow traders, is there any true respect beyond the horizontal circularity of the economic? Cephalus' piety is conventional, traditional, but not philosophical, that is, not thought through. He has no vigour, no internal force with which to fire the hearts and minds of even his own sons. Cephalus clearly could not make a Callicles or a Thrasymachus listen!

As Cephalus, on the threshold of death, leaves the party and shuffles out to perform the sacrifices, it is clear that he represents the old ways, themselves decaying from within, losing daily their traditional authority and lustre, undermined by cynicism, corruption, and bitterness. In the remainder of that book, definition after definition of Justice is offered, and each in turn discarded after a *reductio ad absurdum* reveals its emptiness. Four definitions are offered: Justice is to tell the truth and pay debts (1.331d), Justice is to render to each his due (1.331e), Justice is to do good to friends and harm enemies (1.332d), and finally, in no case is it just to harm anyone (1.335e). It is interesting to note that Polemarchus' definition, like his father's, reverts to a commercial structure; the just man is useful in handling our money. Economic circularity is typical of the structure of the non-philosopher's view of Justice. The social contract is one in which all agree to limit their predatory ways in order to enjoy the fruits of their individual dominions, the purchase of a truce within the context of a larger war. The listeners are silent while the definitions are worked through with care and caution, drawing upon the authority of the poets, divinely inspired in questions such as these, moving from extensional to intentional definition, clarifying with painstaking precision, revealing exceptions that speak against the rule. Here dialectic is a communal art, led on by the great teacher, shared by fellow

wisdom-seekers intent upon their quest.

It is appropriate to the character of Thrasymachus that he burst into the conversation, at just that moment of peaceful intercourse, with a violent force that tears through that air of good-natured and impassioned mutual seeking, cutting it like a blade.

> "Gathering himself up like a beast, he hurled himself upon us as if he would tear us to pieces...he bawled out in our midst 'What balderdash is this that you have been talking, and why do you Simple Simons truckle and give way to one another?'" (1.336b)

He proceeds, with frightening gestures, shameless insults and *ad hominum* arguments, demanding money (a fine to Socrates) to explain his objections to their discourse and set the gathering straight. With naught but sheer force to back his opinion, he announces his own definition of Justice: the just is nothing else than the advantage of the stronger (1.338c). The dramatic shift in the tone and mood of the dialogue serves to underscore the wide gap between the philosopher and the tyrant, and, simultaneously, the immense distance between responsible leadership and the stark reality of the present political scene is also laid bare. In real life in the Athenian polis, the ruling party really does enact the laws that are to its own best advantage; their highflown words hide a bitter reality beneath the persuasive words of "law" and "justice". It is thus starkly exposed that all states are dangerous (1.338e ff.) and fit well Thrasymachus' definition.

Thus the harsh reality of the state and the nature of the characters who hold the power therein are revealed with a stunning frankness. The huge abyss between the Justice that presides over present states (the advantage of the stronger) and the ideal standard set by Socrates at 1.346e (the care of the weaker by the stronger) only serves to emphasize the profound need for

the philosopher back inside the cave. The stage is thus set for the consideration of the ideal state, one that must persuade and educate the best characters, and yet control, by force if necessary, the worst. The urgency of the discussion on Justice is emphasized: "It is no ordinary matter that we are discussing, but the right conduct of life" (1.352d).

Plato's quest for justice is, from the outset, a search for the value of righteousness in and for itself; Socrates sets out to prove it best by its own peculiar power. Even a good man like Cephalus has shown that human "goods" are not valued intrinsically for their own sake, nor for the sake of the needy other, but for their immediate returns to the self, for the wealth and power they purchase. To show the intrinsic good of true Justice, Socrates must ruthlessly dismantle every prop normally advanced in a defense of justice. He rigorously excludes from the discussion all considerations of social or economic well-being, or simple utility. His righteous man, a simple and noble man, will not be seen as righteous by the world at large, will be shunned and stripped of everything but justice. "We must deprive him of the seeming" (2.361b), Socrates explains. He will have to be stripped of everything but his goodness.

The state is considered first, but simply as a pattern from which to see the human soul writ large. It has already been established that all states are dangerous[14] and that the only just rule considers the good of that which is governed and cared for by it (1.345e). Thus, clearly from the outset, two truths about Justice are established. First, Justice has shown itself to be a *techne*, that is, an art grounded in specific knowledge (1.339d ff.), and, second, it is an art specifically devoted to the care of the other, in particular, of the weaker other. Socrates overturns the rhetorician's definition of *techne* from the *Gorgias* as he insists that no craft is value-neutral,

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[14]*Republic* 1.338e ff. also 6.496cd.

that, instead, all strive toward the Good. Justice cannot be used for evil ends in the Socratic definition, since normative safeguards are built right into the definition of *techne*, rendering professional ethics as part of the very definition of the profession. Thus the true exercise of any craft requires the normatization of the practitioner. However, Socrates demonstrates that Justice is not just one more craft like any other. A specific *techne* requires specific knowledge and bestows a specific benefit; Justice's benefit is of a different kind incommensurable with that of other crafts. For Justice, an extraordinary amount of knowledge is needed, and this knowledge is not a factual knowledge, but a kind of insight, a moral knowledge, a vision of ends. Furthermore, Justice's benefit is pervasive; it rules over the other crafts. It is the peculiarly human excellence (1.334, 1.335c), the human shape of Goodness, the "excellence or virtue of soul" (1.353e), reaping the life which is blessed and happy (1.354a). Socrates is strikingly emphatic: In his definition, by its very nature, Justice cannot do harm (1.335e). Therefore, it is no ordinary matter for dialectical dissection or friendly debate, but the very essence of the good life under discussion here. Justice directs how life is to be lived both individually and collectively (1.352d).

The implications of this definition are stunning! Without Justice, we lose our humanity; the life of injustice is the life of the beast. Precisely because the Good is beyond the Forms, and because Justice is that form which is peculiar in its pervasiveness, the Good could not affect the world, would not be accessible to human beings, if not through the forms in its human shape as Justice.

The first city designed with this definition in mind is the one which at 2.372d Adimantus

will come to call "a city of pigs"[15]. Socrates, however, gives no hint of any shortcoming in this design. On the contrary, he expressly states:

> The true state I believe to be the one we have described
> --the healthy state, as it were. But if it is your pleasure
> that we contemplate also a fevered state..." (2.372e)

and Socrates goes on to swell its bulk and stuff it with diversity and multiplicity beyond the requirements of the necessary. He is clearly discarding the healthy state simply because, with Adimantus' reaction, it is affirmed that man's nature is far more grasping and covetous than this simple city allows. In this first model, justice lies in the fair mutual exchange of products between artisans. Farmers, craftsmen, traders and labourers perform their individual tasks and work co-operatively toward a life of modest pleasures which provides for fundamental human needs. One is struck with the certainty that this is the philosopher's village, supplying the modest needs of a life dedicated not to acquisition but to honest labour, collective and individual harmony, and meditation. However, as Adimantus' objection admits, the common man on the street will not see this as a blessed simplicity, but as an animal existence which does not permit of the luxuries essential to a more cultured and sophisticated people, a more grasping people.

Let us consider then the second city. We shall call this second creation, designed according to the demands of Adimantus, "the city in *logos*". This city will be the "fevered" city, "swollen" with the added luxuries and adornments, filled up with "a multitude of things that exceed the requirements of necessity in states" (2.373b). This is a state which, in addition to filling the needs of its citizenry, feeds their desires and thus unleashes competitiveness,

[15]Adimantus' objection is shown to be quite natural at *Republic* 6.503c: "Facility in learning, memory, sagacity, quickness of apprehension, and their accompaniments, and youthful spirit and magnificence in soul are qualities, you know, that are rarely combined in human nature with a disposition to live orderly, quiet and stable lives."

covetousness, greed and treachery. At this point, it looks as though the new state will have much in common with the realities from which a Thrasymachus has argued. Ironically, the Socratic attempt to deliver Justice to the collective soul of the state appears to be a community built upon the bitter realities of the present, where all stand in mutual competition for goods, and the ruler stands in the best possible position from which to wrest these from his fellow men.

Socrates, however, will want something more, after a pattern laid down in the heavens. It would be best if each man were to rule himself, but not all men have a clear vision of the Good. Power will have to be wielded, since men's desires tend to run well beyond the necessary, it will fall to the philosopher to take up this burden since his refusal reaps the horrors of tyrannical rule. Socrates explains:

> The chief penalty is to be governed by someone worse if a man will not himself hold office and rule. It is from fear of this, it appears to me, that the better sort hold office when they do, and then they go to it not in the expectation of enjoyment nor as to a good thing, but as to a necessary evil and because they are unable to turn it over to better men than themselves or to their like. (347c)

The tyrant and the philosopher determine the extreme poles of human collective living. Power will need to be wielded. The techniques and tools of the craft of power management may be the same for the bad as for the good ruler, but their results will be very different. Power will be wielded by the good ruler, not as a good in itself but with an eye to an end, a moral end, a higher good. It will have to satisfy the best of the youth, answer their objections against the "old ways" and, while somehow remaining responsive to the natural human desire for something more than a "city of pigs", at the same time it must find a way to hold back a Thrasymachus. The power must be taken up, then, but it must be given a human face. With the tools shown to be at the

disposal of the powerful, (authority, persuasion, and force when necessary), government must be humanized according to the *techne* of Justice.

Plato's alternative to the tyrant will be the philosopher-king. Thw world of power and politics cannot charm this philosopher. Like Socrates, he cannot be swayed by the goods of this world. He wants for nothing, least of all to rule, so abuse of power cannot be a problem. There is nothing there to tempt him. In his idealised cognitive and moral state, he already has all that he needs for fulfilment and happiness. He stands outside the cave. But if he does not take the power another will, so he must descend for the good of the others. With his idealised objects of knowledge, he can rule others according to a vision of a higher end. Ideally, others will notice his reluctance to rule, recognize his genuine disinterest in the glory and wealth that generally attract men to power, and grant him the trust that he thus deserves. They will willingly listen, answering the concern at 327c: "Could you persuade us if we refused to listen?"[16]

The completed plan for the ideal state is outlined in the concluding pages of the second book and through the entire third book. Here Plato describes an austere purging in literature and art, a purification of the environment and the mode of life. Men are matched to the *techne* most fitting to their individual natures, according to the proviso at 2.370ab, with each keeping to his own specialty (2.374b). Much care is taken in considering the guardians of the fevered city. These are chosen from the best and most well-rounded natures in the state.

> The love of wisdom, then, and high spirit and quickness
> and strength will be combined for us in the nature of him
> who is to be a good and true guardian of the state. (2.376c)

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[16]That philosophers are not honoured in present cities as they are in this ideal one is explained in the myth of the shipmaster at 6.488 ff.

The guardians are prepared according to an austere and severely controlled education; gymnastics for the body, music for the soul, story-telling to shape the young character, though rigorously censured to omit those harmful to the soul. Mothers and nurses must adhere to an accepted list of tales, generally those which depict the just man as happy and the unjust as unhappy (3.392ab), from which list even Homer and Hesiod are to be slashed since these represent the gods and heroes doing the utmost wrong, warring with one another, and committing all manner of violence and atrocity (2.377d ff.). Tales which engender fear of death are to be omitted as well, so children will grow brave and fearless (3.386a-c). In the city in *logos*, truth is to be prized highly, but not above all else. The ruler may lie freely "as a remedy or form of medicine" (3.389bc). Clearly the practical pursuit of good ends takes precedence over truth for its own sake. To avoid the fractioning of the human faculty through the arts of imitation, comedy and tragedy will be omitted from the experiences of the young guardians. The Muses will be in charge of the culture of the soul, but only melodies which affirm steadfast endurance and peaceful sobriety will be heard in this city (3.399ab). Gymnastics will be a simple program designed more for its effect on the soul than the body. In fact, there will be no undue or excessive attention paid to the body, no strained diets or regimen of a military or ascetic nature, but education will be designed to go on naturally and unconsciously. This is consistent with Book VII's injunction that there be no compulsion in teaching; it must always be done as an amusement[17]. So we may say that the rigorous education of the young will amount to an attunement of the soul and a purification of the desires so that they may grow into guardians who

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[17]7.536d. Surely this is another concession to the opening question at 1.327c: "But *could* you persuade us...if we refuse to listen?"

may dwell within the "fevered" and "swollen" city but stand as examples to other men, by holding to the higher ideals of bravery, indifference to wealth, freedom from wrath, purity of heart, and fairness in dealing with others. Adherence to truth will be a secondary feature, dispensible where necessary to practical aims. The truly "musical" education of the guardians is meant to set the vibrations of the good man's nature and instill a genuine love for the virtues by applying the canons of simplicity and austerity to all forms of thought and activity[18]. They will dwell in the real world of complexity and diversity, but free from the personal ambitions which breed quarrelsomeness and discord in the soul. It is for these reasons, that E.J.Urwick insists that "the whole of Plato's education is a religious education"[19].

Thus the pattern for Justice is established in the state at large, and is stated to be identical in form to the pattern for Justice within the individual. The "human pattern" of Justice, then, amounts to the doing of one's own business within each of the parts of the *psyche* for the purpose of the inner tuning of the soul (4.443c ff.). The individual soul is comprised of three parts: the rational element whose virtue is intelligence, the spirited element whose virtue is bravery, and the appetitive element whose virtue is sobriety. The just man will not suffer the parts to interfere with the work or the "beautiful order" of the whole, just as, in the state, it is the good of the whole which is the *telos* of the pattern (4.420bc). It is important to note that such order is a "natural order" (4.435b) in the state or in the individual soul, yielding the greatest happiness to the whole, rendering the "good life" to its constituent parts. Ideally, the elements of the soul may be persuaded by reason to observe propriety and moderation and to stay within the confines of

[18]See also 4.441e ff.

[19]E.J.Urwick. *The Platonic Quest.* Santa Barbara: Concord Grove Press. 1983. p.79.

their individual spheres, but, occasionally, force may be necessary, since appetites and passions do not naturally occur as self-limiting.

V. The Problems With Platonic Justice.

As the first ideal city, "the city of pigs", is being described in the second book of the *Republic*, the reader is immediately struck by the sense that this model is as far removed from the complex realities of human living as could be imagined. It is a truly "ideal" city. This is only affirmed by Adimantus' harsh assessment of it.

However, as the second "ideal city", the city in *logos*, is unfolded, it soon becomes clear that this "fevered" and "swollen" city, though much more realistic concerning the true desires and appetites of the actual citizen, faces fundamental difficulties of its own. While proper education is immediately posited as the cradle from which Justice will arise in the state at large and in the individual citizen, that education, from the outset, offends our natural sense of full human living and well-being, and strikes us as nothing short of an experiential and intellectual straightjacket. Ironically, in this utopia, cognitive ability is not encouraged. In fact, the complexities of the human are suddenly reduced to a frightening stricture as each citizen comes to be defined entirely in terms of an excellence which amounts to his service to the state. The citizen has become his function. His education is addressed merely to that end, his entire life defined by his civic responsibility. With this radical and intrusive notion of education, the human being is reduced from a complex soul having various centres of learning, juggling responsibilities faced both inward and outward (as depicted in the psychological complexity of the soul in the *Phaedrus*), to a single narrow task: that of the good citizen. In the opening of Book II, Glaucon had initiated the discussion of Justice because he was anxious to have Socrates show that Justice is good in and for itself, and not merely for its results. However, in this second state, it is clear that the means are again justified by the end as our humanity comes to be

redefined as a vocational goal and the individual human being is subordinated to the *telos* of an orderly citizen body. The implications of that vision become frighteningly apparent in the completed picture of the educated guardian. He stands as a "watchdog" over the others.

Furthermore, the entire life pattern in the state is designed to reinforce the education of the "watchdog". A ruthless control is exercised over every detail of life. Children, who do not even know their parents, are raised by the state so that all distractions to that education may be omitted. Extremes of luxury and culture, the very features added to the second city to make it more humanly appealing, are one by one stripped away. These, it is clear, have only been added in order to be legislated out again. Socrates' second state, offered as a concession to reality, is only ostensibly a concession to real human desires. But it is a concession to the realities of political rule. The city in *logos* is a compromise between the anarchy of the ship of state described at 6.488a ff. wherein the philosopher proves entirely useless and injustice occurs randomly, and the state of *tyrannos* wherein injustice is guaranteed for all. However, Plato shows that, as the philosopher runs up against the real world, his knowledge of good ends will sometimes require undesirable means, as he finds himself caught up in the evil necessity of manipulating the charges in his care, with persuasion, lies, and outright force. Suspension of his dedication to the truth and betrayal of the trust of his fellow-citizens become the banal necessities of the position of power. Plato makes it stunningly clear, as the *Republic*'s arguments for Justice unfold, that true Justice is to be a rare commodity in the "ideal city", and that there are no constitutional differences whatsoever between the tyrant's city and the philosopher's.

Even as Justice comes to be redefined as the priority of the community in the state, so Justice for the individual is found in the ordered harmony of the complexity of opposing forces

in the soul. Each part has its separate needs and desires, and, though the modest fulfilment of these is not to be ignored, the overall individual function is its service to the orderly management of the whole. The parallel drawn between the state and the individual soul become problematic from a variety of perspectives, not least for its use of vocational language in the description of both, and for the implications of that language upon a notion of Justice. The reader, expecting to discover a kinder, more compassionate society in the one designed, ruled and "healed" by the soul's physician, is left with somewhat empty hands and a cold heart at the prospect of the completed utopia. Many questions arise. How is the reconciliation of private good and public order to be achieved? If the individual is *one* man, is he vocationally unified, or unified by internal justice? Are these mutually compatible? How systematic and comprehensive should education be? Is there not inherent danger in the attempt to anthropomorphize the state? Is not the failure to calculate the sum of human happiness and misery within that ordered whole a fatal *moral* error in its construction, an unforgivable crime against Justice itself? Is the *physis-nomos* dichotomy ever really overcome? What is the meaning behind the ambiguous positing of the two models of Justice in the *Republic*? If the "city of pigs" is in fact the best model, as Socrates claims it to be, then why bother at all with the second luxurious city based on unnecessary wants and fevered greed? If the definition of Justice as gentleness toward friends and hostility toward enemies was discarded unequivocally (at 1.332d), why is the "watchdog" image, with its frightening allusion to the realm of the beast, raised at all? Not in the least do these guardians assume an aura of goodness; they are not just. The wise guardian has had music education, his passions have been evoked to feel and love the beauty of Justice and to hate the ugliness of injustice. The ideals to which this utopia leads, it may be argued, are in direct

conflict to central Platonic teachings. Socrates could never be that philosopher. Plato tells us as much: that philosopher has to be wise.

The many problems in the *Republic*'s vision of Justice are not to be easily dismissed with any single simple explanation. The complexity and ambiguity in this work, as in Plato's entire corpus, are no mere errors in his rationalistic calculations of the Good, but attest to his astute awareness of the complexity and the ambiguity of the human and its relationship to the ideal. In the ideal city, Plato is making several attempts at overturning the non-philosopher's understanding of the natural and the just. Plato begins from the Sophist's *physis-nomos* dichotomy and its claim that Justice is never going to be natural, as laid out by Callicles in the *Gorgias* and by Thrasymachus in the *Republic* I. This view sees the human being as naturally self-seeking at the expense of others, and *nomos* as serving the purpose of limiting that individual rapaciousness for the sake of a greater mutual self-interest, a precarious peace in which to enjoy the spoils of the individual war. Plato's attempt to overturn this accepted "truth" about human nature lies in his insistence that the human being can be just *by nature*, that nature and convention can abide in a harmony which can be lasting and reliable. This possibility admits of a human potentiality. Human nature is pliable; it can be rearranged according to the harmonious ordering of its three parts. The goal of education is to restructure those parts to achieve the best possible mixture, to mold the best possible nature. In this psychic restructuring, the human being remains self-serving, but no longer at the expense of others. Each part of the *psyche* looks to its own house in order to make for a harmonious whole. Each strives toward a unique virtue, sobriety for the appetitive, courage for the passionate, wisdom for the rational element, and the ordered whole makes for the human. Though, at first, this restructuring may

present itself as reminiscent of the Sophistic model of Justice in the state, whereby self-interest is seen as compatible with the advantage of each of the parts, unlike Gorgias' model, Plato's souls are not limited by their greater desire to enjoy the fruits of their power without interference. Their self-ordering stems instead from the happiness purchased through a carefully administered education toward a well-directed life in a meaningful occupation. Their happiness is so complete in fact that they are not even aware that this involves a limitation of other "goods". We might say that personal freedom ceases to be a "good" or, rather, it comes to be seen as a merely relative good, happily traded for a true and lasting Good, *eudaimonia* or human flourishing. And as Justice, redefined as a happy self-limiting in each member of the society, renders Justice to the state as a whole, convention can now be seen, not to oppose, but to ratify nature. Justice, the peculiarly human excellence, is as natural and as pervasive as the desire for happiness. It is the *human* written as potentiality.

Thus we may say that the *Republic* addresses, not merely one of the many philosophical questions that puzzle mankind, but *the* philosophical question. The *Republic*'s inquiry is no longer merely "What is it to be just?" but "What is it to be human?" To be human is a moral category, an excellence, determined by a relational pattern laid up in heaven. Our humanity is not a simple potentiality that human beings *have*. It is a potentiality that human beings *are*, to be achieved through insight. At higher levels of consciousness, there is an increasing fusion of the rational with the passionate and the appetitive, as the merely selfish goal of fulfilment of immediate wants and desires falls away and is replaced by higher ideals. In highly organised societies at their best, social specialization encourages excellence in each arena of human endeavour and inward fulfilment of the individual, but, without attention to higher ideals,

success and reward in these endeavours come to be identified with the accumulation of goods for their own sake, resulting in bitter competitiveness, social conflict, and ultimately exploitation of one's fellow man. Knowledge, as the Sophists have shown, can win power, wealth and glory in the state, and, as Cephalus has shown, can purchase the favour of the gods, freedom from guilt and fear of death. It is Plato's project in the *Republic* to rupture the ties between knowledge and its worldly advantages by making the only truly valuable knowledge knowledge of the Good. In response to the Sophists' claims about their craft, Socrates insists upon building into the very definition of *techne* the professional ethics which will act as safeguard against its corruption and ensure its direction toward the Good. Plato shows that for Justice an extraordinary amount of knowledge is required. We tend to think of Justice as merely factual knowledge concerned with the ordering of the state. We assume that it amounts to a kind of constitutional tinkering which needs to be perfected. However, Plato insists that the problem lies at a much deeper level; Justice is not a matter of *how much* knowledge the ruler has, but *what kind* of knowledge. The *techne* of Justice involves a moral knowledge, a normative awareness that insulates the ruler against the normal corruptiveness of power. As Plato cuts the ties between power and its worldly rewards, he affirms the Good for its own sake, and replaces worldly "goods" with the true reward of human happiness.

The truly intriguing feature of the *Republic* lies in the fact that Plato, once he has drawn for us, with the most exquisite detail, the portraits of the perfectly just state and the perfectly just man, then, tosses the canvas aside, as it were, with the assertion that this is not Justice, nor is it Reality. Add to this assertion the profound doubts expressed by Socrates at every turn of the construction, and we are left at the end of the *Republic* with a gnawing sense of empty-

handedness. Given these disclaimers, it seems clear that we would be greatly mistaken should we choose to read the *Republic* simply as a brilliant account of social, political, moral, and metaphysical speculations. If taken as concrete guidelines for the governing of an actual state, then much of the teaching of this dialogue presents itself as unintelligible, perverse, and often outright ridiculous. Some other, much deeper, meaning must be sought if the *Republic* is to make any sense to us at all. E.J.Urwick offers an alternative explanation of Plato's project in this dialogue, one that is worthy of consideration here. He states:

> Plato posits the existence of another life open to us all, if we will, not after our death, but while we are still on earth and members of an earthly society. And *its* conditions and laws are the true and only subject matter of the highest science and the deepest philosophy.[1]

In Urwick's brilliant work, *The Platonic Quest*, he explains that Plato is expressing ideals which can only be described as "religious"[2]. These ideals are meant to guide the philosopher in his attempt to live the spiritual life in the non-ideal city. Judged as political theory, the blueprint of the ideal state is of little value, and veers toward the ridiculous and the grotesque. But judged as expressions, in the political and social medium, of fundamental philosophical doctrines, these same theories are remarkably profound[3]. Our ethics are all designed to function within the cave. Our political and social theories grow out of the non-philosopher's truths as espoused by Callicles and Thrasymachus. But Plato's deepest teachings, according to Urwick, are expressly

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[1]E.J.Urwick. *The Platonic Quest*. Santa Barbara: Concord Grove Press. 1983. p.41. (originally published as *The Message of Plato: An Interpretation of the "Republic"*. London: Methuen. 1920.)

[2]A similar approach is taken by Alfarabi in his Summary of Plato's *Laws*. See esp. Joshua Parens. *Metaphysics as Rhetoric*. Albany: State University of New York Press. 1995.

[3]Urwick. *The Platonic Quest*. p.41.

aimed at carrying us beyond the world of the mundane, and comprise a superhuman or otherworldly ethic. Cornford makes a similar claim by asserting that Plato's is the philosophy of a spirit which must find its way within the polis while learning to turn away from its realities. He states:

> Within the *Republic* itself, the more completely Plato discloses all that is meant by the pursuit of wisdom, the farther recedes the prospect that the evils of human life will ever be cured by the enthronement of reason in any possible form of society.[4]

Plato's *Republic* seeks ultimately to overturn the non-philosopher's blind conviction that knowledge is good because of what it purchases. The *Gorgias* and the first book of the *Republic* had shown that men of all ages, backgrounds, and occupations agree that the value of knowledge is to be found in the power that accompanies it. That power ensures wealth, political and legal advantage, the blessings of the gods, freedom from remorse, and the respect of one's fellow citizens; in essence, it guarantees happiness. Plato severs the ties between those worldly "goods" and knowledge by insisting that the only valuable knowledge is knowledge of the Good. Though unattainable in this life, the search for *that* knowledge is what gives human life its meaning, and makes for true happiness. It is the search after true Goodness that unites all men[5], not only the diverse characters of fifth century Athens, but across the barriers of culture and time. Plato confronts the modern reader as much as he did his fellow citizen with the ultimate problem of politics: How can the state be ordered such that the power of the helm does not corrupt its helmsman and guarantee injustice to its passengers? As long as knowledge is viewed as

[4]Francis M. Cornford. *The Republic of Plato*. London: Oxford University Press. 1945. pp.xxvii-xxviii.

[5]*Republic* 6.505de.

important for its connection to wealth and power, the ship of state will continue to be coveted by the ambitious and ruthless. It is a credit to Plato's genius that he recognised the problem of injustice in the state as a problem with the definition of knowledge. The man with the power of words and the illusion of knowledge can wield the appropriate arguments to achieve any unjust course in the name of political expediency and reasons of state. The *Republic* seeks to separate worldly knowledge, the uncritical, unreflective truths of the cave, from moral knowledge directed toward a higher ideal than wealth or power, in an effort to realign man's thinking in the direction of the Good.

Every reader will find something unacceptable in the Platonic solution to the problem of Justice, but Plato will have achieved his purpose if he merely challenges the reader to a rethinking of the problem, for the essence of Plato's philosophy lies ever in the Socratic truth, that wisdom begins when we recognise that we do not know what we think we know. Let us take literally Socrates' remarks in Book II which state that the city is to be considered solely as the soul writ large, to enable us to see more clearly the individual ethic being offered here. If we put aside for a moment the harsh portrait of the rigorous and austere life in the earthly city which devotes itself to the ideal of Platonic Justice, and instead consider solely what it means for the individual to live by the *Republic*'s politics, we begin to see another more subtle truth emerge. To live by this politics means to love Justice with a passion, to put that human excellence before all else, to know the nobility of it, the beauty of its truth. It means to care little for private property, to gladly share with friends, to put the community first, treating other citizens as one's brothers and sisters, all children as one's own. It means to be wise and yet not intellectualizing. It means to embody a goodness and a public-spiritedness so entirely spontaneous and natural that

one is not even aware of these qualities in oneself. It means to nurture in oneself a passionate and courageous spirit, a temperate appetite, and a wise intellect, denying none of these essential elements, but submitting each part to the good of the whole person. The healthy human pattern demonstrates that Justice is all about letting one's humanity flower, and is anything but passion's enemy. The word names that state of soul in which passions and appetites do not destroy or do unnecessary harm, but find themselves in their measure in a world over which they cannot exercise control. Only in injustice do a person's passions drive themselves as though they were definitive of the world around them and of their own event, destroying themselves in the process of a lot of needless harm to others. Plato is wisely demonstrating that, in rendering Justice to oneself, the individual must take consideration of many other things in addition to the interests of passion and appetite if those elements are to find blossom in their own time and space and healthy expression in growth of life.

The Justice of the *Republic* is an ethics for philosophers. The philosopher has seen wisdom with his bodily eyes, having already stepped outside the cave. He knows the value of a thoughtful Justice and is thus prepared to sacrifice the blissful life of solitary contemplation of the Beautiful, and return to the cave to guide the non-philosopher. He hears the call of Justice and responds. The *Republic* is a spiritual manual written in secret rune and cryptic verse, a code to be broken by the philosopher to guide him in his spiritual journey among ordinary men in the fevered and swollen cities of our world. Its very ambiguity attests to Plato's conviction that even the best writing can be misread and put to evil purposes, that words of truth are dangerous without love of truth[6]. The following statement from the *Seventh Epistle* attests to Plato's

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[6] *Phaedrus* 275c ff.

conviction that serious truths like those exposed in the *Republic* should not be handed over lightly to the non-philosopher:

> "For this reason no serious man will ever think of writing about serious realities for the general public". [7]

[7] *Seventh Epistle*. 344c. See also 341b-344, especially 341de.

VI. A Mad Justice.

In the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, Justice takes on an ugly demeanor as the tyrannical despot in the realm of the "Said". Levinas interprets the state and its legal hardware as an essentially violent system which takes incommensurable beings and reduces them to equality and anonymity. It strips them of their singularity, their uniqueness, their irreducible identity, reduces each to a nameless face in the sea of humanity. The realm of Justice is the ultimate totalitarian "system" grounding itself in a knowledge which is power in its most despotic form. Only the judges and the lawyers can unlock the secret codes of the law, only the rulers can dictate the reasons of state that justify their every action. We all stand accused before them, helpless and naked, at their mercy, begging to be understood in the uniqueness of our individual case. The realm of the Said is a closed book, where all that has been laid down is written in stone, unbending, uncaring, unforgiving. Levinas' description of Justice fits well Plato's images of the state of *tyrannos*.

Socrates spent his life (both literally and figuratively) keeping the closed system open, reducing to *aporia* the dogmatic claims of certainty of his fellow Athenians. Plato made a life's work of remembering the beloved master, sketching that quest with his immortalizing pen, and, in his turn, continuing that mission, reducing his every construction to play of irony. Plato's search for knowledge never hardens into a preaching or a dogmatism, but remains ever that open questioning which considers, questions and leaves an open space. Plato notes difficulties and dangers with "written text" in the same frightening tones as does Levinas. At the end of the

Phaedrus[1], Socrates states:

> You know, Phaedrus, that's the strange thing about writing... once a thing is put in writing, the composition, whatever it may be, drifts all over the place, getting into the hands not only of those who understand it, but equally of those who have no business with it; it doesn't know how to address the right people, and not address the wrong...(275de)

Here Plato makes clear that words of truth are dangerous without love of truth. They comprise a "bastard discourse" which has a tendency to run errant and betray its author's intention. Without a father to guide and protect its meaning, the closed text is condemned to misunderstanding and illegitimacy. Plato sees the written discourse precariously poised for any to take up and twist from the author's good intention to personal advantage and private gain. These criticisms are valid and explain the inflated importance, if not the very existence, of politician and lawyer in modern society. While both thinkers share a fundamental distrust of the closed discourse, the "Said", the Levinasian criticisms of the written word differ fundamentally from the Platonic. Where Plato notes the tendency of a written composition to slip about and lend itself to a variety of meanings, Levinas criticizes its very intransigence, its failure to listen and adjust itself to individual beings and singular situations. It is rigid and unbending, unsympathetic to the subtleties of the individual case. Hence, it ceases to be a discourse, hardens into stone. Thus written discourse comprises a good analogy for our political and legal systems. Our hardware of justice is grounded in a firm conviction that Justice can only be found in reciprocity and symmetry; we consider all men equal and then measure their use value to the whole to establish their intrinsic worth. It is this very grounding which Levinas challenges, problematizes, and, at

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[1]*Phaedrus* 275c ff.

the same time, affirms as an evil necessity of social interaction. Levinas states:

> In political life, taken unrebuked, humanity is understood from its works--a humanity of interchangeable men, of reciprocal relations. The substitution of men for one another, the primal disrespect, makes possible exploitation itself.[2]

The assumption that we can assess the worth of an infinitely unknowable being by a calculation of the sum of his actions is, for Levinas, the greatest delusion, and the ultimate violence. He states:

> Action does not express. It has meaning, but leads us to the agent in his absence. To approach someone from works is to enter into his interiority as though by burglary...Works signify their author, but indirectly, in the third person.[3]

In Levinas' opinion, then, to view another's acts dispassionately, from the *outside* as it were, is to remove them from the original realm of their truth, their authentic contextuality, their "primordial sphere".

Thus we may state that, in the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, true justice cannot be found in the sphere of "Justice". An attempt can and must always be made to return the "Said" to the realm of the living, breathing spoken word, the "saying" of face to face discourse, in each individual case, giving the unique party that chance to return from his absence, and to speak for himself. Only in this way can a legal or political system make any claim whatsoever to true justice.

The only true justice, for Levinas, is always and at the same time, injustice. In fact, we may say that, with Levinas, justice makes room for a certain counter-violence against the

[2]*Totality and Infinity*. p.298.

[3]*Totality and Infinity*. pp.66-67.

violence at work in the realm of "Justice" (in the state). As the separated being goes about his joyful ontological adventure, filling his needs, postponing his fears, thinking, manipulating his tools, and utilizing his everyday world, he is suddenly pulled up short, struck helpless from without. His safe and happy interiority is burst asunder by the face of the needy other in all its naked destitution. In *Totality and Infinity*, this call is described as a "delightful lapse of the ontological" according to which we are invited to host the widow, the orphan and the alien. However, the deeply frightening nature of this call is revealed in *Otherwise Than Being* as the "delightful lapse" collapses into a "shock", an "oppression", an "obsession", and a "persecution". Here, in a far darker mood, Levinas abandons the theme of the welcoming host, and presents a frank account of the brutal rape of one's freedom that so often occurs with the moral response. Frightening as this account is, it is readily recognizable by any mother who has nursed a sick child through the night, any friend who has sat in vigil of a loved one through the nightmare of attempted suicide. One's freedom is not merely put into question during such moments of rupture; it is torn away like strips of flesh from a living being. Such moments constitute a shattering of the realm of identity, turning inside out the comfortable world of the known and the trusted.

However, Levinas does not stop here, for we are not merely called, beyond our human capability, to soothe the friend and heal the sick, to feed the hungry and shelter the homeless. We are called to assume the burden even of the other man's lack of responsibility, to take on the moral weight of the most radical evil that confronts us. In the excessive burden of this moral call, we are faced with the Death Camp Guard as he holds the pistol to our heads; we are invited to the event of our own execution, and ultimately we must assume the responsibility for that

event.

Such a response can only be described as a madness. In Yiddish, this ecstatic abandonment of all that makes sense, all that is "good" for the self, a holocaust of self-interest, is termed *"meshougass"*. In the Greek tradition, we find this same madness which abandons self-interest and ruptures *conatus essendi* in the Promethean myth. Prometheus stole fire from the gods, a gift which would allow the mere mortal an escape from the despair of his mortality, the limits of his finitude. Without the compassion of Prometheus, Simone Weil[4] explains, man's existence would have remained pathetic and meaningless:

> A creature haggard with solitude,
> in his stomach a ceaseless gnawing, like a rat,
> that makes him run, trembling with weariness
> to flee the hunger he only escapes in death;
> seeking his food through dark forests;
> blind when night spreads its shadows;
> in the hollow of rocks stricken with mortal cold;
> only coupling in chance embraces;
> a prey to the gods, wailing under their blows -
> men, without Prometheus, you would be like that.

But that gift to man was, at the same moment, an agonizing self-sacrifice for this mad messiah.

> Through him, dawn is an immortal joy.
> But a bitter destiny holds him bent under.
> Iron nails him to the rock; his forehead reels;
> into him, hanging crucified,
> cold anguish enters like a knife.
> Hours, seasons, epochs gnaw his soul.
> day after day exhausts his heart.
> His body twists in vain against the constraint;
> the escaping minute throws his cry to the winds:

[4]The following are excerpts from the poem, "Prometheus" by Simone Weil, (1937) written after her own transformative experience in the metallurgy industry, the Promethean art of them all. This poem was sent to Paul Valery and is printed with his reply in *Poemes, suivis de Venise Sauvee* (1968). pp 22-24, 9-10.

alone, obscure, his flesh exposed to misery.

It is mad to love man this way. Yet this is precisely what the Levinasian Good calls forth from us, the ultimate moral response, the ultimate self-sacrifice. The good man must be prepared to tear one's own liver from its fleshy vault, and repeats it again on the morrow. The only true justice is to be found in the response to this calling unto death, in the fulfilment of the divine election to be messiah unto one's fellow man. The good man throws himself into the abyss of suffering and death in accordance with the divinely mad desire to prolong the life of a complete stranger. He willingly and humbly takes upon his own shoulders the unbearable misery of the widow, the orphan and the alien, the responsibility even for the irresponsibility of a Hitler.

The utter madness of this self-sacrifice is agonizingly apparent here. Wherein is justice to be found for the individual being when responsibility's call becomes this burdensome? For Levinas, the summons to responsibility, in all its staggering horror, is the only occasion of true justice for the singular being. Individual justice is born, at that moment of ultimate response, since it is then that man's destiny as a moral being is fulfilled. Up until then, justice is mere potential, implanted in man according to divine ordination before his creation, and his freedom, to this point a thief's freedom, is only then fully justified.

To understand this troubling aspect of Levinas' thought, we must consider his "myth" of creation. In a creation *ex nihilo*, man is created utterly free, as a being entirely convinced of his autonomy. Yet, in a prearchaic creation, in a time before time and thought and memory and calculation and contemplation, man has already been elected to goodness, invested with the potential to act as the instrument of divine justice. This blindness to his own origin, Levinas sees as a boon to man, rendering him totally free for goodness and in a position to give a pure gift of

himself to the other. This "forgetfulness" before the birth of thought and memory is a credit to man's maker,[5]a divine humility, god's own "self-forgetting"[6].

In Levinas' universe, there is no divine plan for the cosmic drama which establishes man's destiny or ensures his salvation; the creature is not shaped according to a program of fact and redemption which would bring glory to a god who stands as grand director of the universe. There is no overriding order or teleological design, only an individual creature throwing himself into a chaotic universe, stumbling and searching, carving out a safe corner for his survival. In the blind conviction of his own self-sufficiency, the creature stands alone, free to fail morally, or to accept the calling and become the embodiment of justice. Or, perhaps we might rather say, the creature and god stand to fail together or to fashion between them an ideal of justice which assumes a higher human order than a salvation programmed from without.

The passion to survive, the fear of Death, are as primal in the individual being as the horror of Being, the imprisonment in anonymity. Yet there is something even more primordial. Before consciousness, which brings with it the horrors and the fears of being, the moral seed was planted as a call to something greater than mere survival. The essence of our humanity lies in this calling. To be created human is to have been preordained as divine agent, as agent of the Good. The vulnerable self was elected in a "time before time", in a "prearchaic" time, and designated as a holocaust to his neighbour, even before consciousness, even before he could *know* what he was being called to do. The self had a meaning before he became a being, and that

[5]*Totality and Infinity*. pp.58-59.

[6]*Totality and Infinity*. pp.58-59.

meaning, though inaccessible to thought or memory, waits to be awakened by the face of the neighbour.

> The "for itself" as a mode of existence designates an attachment to oneself as radical as a naive will to live... The relationship with the Other does not move (as does cognition) into enjoyment and possession, into freedom; the other imposes himself as an exigency that dominates this freedom, and hence as more primordial than everything that takes place in me.[7]

The being created *ex nihilo* is a creature who feels himself to be entirely free, but whose uprising is essentially dependence. However, this dependence cannot be defined by the structure of a part to the whole; multiplicity does not receive its meaning from its place in the entirety of creation, but breaks free from system, positing itself as a creature outside of any system. Its very dependence assumes the shape of an independence, its exteriority to the system.

> What is essential to created existence is not the limited character of its being, and the concrete structure of the creature is not deducible from this finitude. What is essential to created existence is its separation with regard to the Infinite.[8]

When the dependent creature, feeling himself to be entirely free, abandons that freedom, and bestows the world of his possessions upon the needy other, the Good beyond Being is evoked, justice is done, and a trace of God passes by. In the presence of the Other, through the notion of the Infinite, the free and conscious being finds himself hurdled backwards through time, over the stumbling block of his consciousness, and into the timeless realm of the prearche. Stripped of the hedonistic self, he becomes the agonizingly exposed self in a "glorieux abaissement" which

[7] *Totality and Infinity*. p.87.

[8] *Totality and Infinity*. p.105.

realizes the human destiny. Levinas explains:

> I am trying to show that man's ethical relation to the other is ultimately prior to his ontological relation to himself (egology) or to the totality of things that we call the world.[9]

Thus justice is to be achieved in the individual self as he lays himself bare to the other, and assumes his call as messiah, naked and vulnerable, divine agent of the Good. Only in allowing himself to be thrown outside of his being, decentred from his ontological existence, is the dignity of man restored. This restoration is a disclosure with regard to freedom. The violent freedom of the ontological adventure was previously an innocent ignorance. The separated self knows no goal outside of enjoyment. He lives life for its own content, for the pure joy of living. Everything enters into his world as a love of a "good". He is:

> innocently egoist and alone. Not against the Others, not "as for me..."--but entirely deaf to the Other, outside of all communication and all refusal to communicate--without ears, like a hungry stomach.[10]

Man comes into his humanity as conscience[11] is born. Conscience welcomes the other, assumes the weight of the other, suffers for the other, dies for the other. Conscience, Levinas explains:

> is the revelation of a resistance to my powers that does not counter them as a greater force, but calls in question the naive right of my powers, my glorious spontaneity as a living being. Morality begins when freedom, instead of being justified by itself, feels itself to be arbitrary and violent.[12]

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[9] *Face to Face with Levinas*. Richard A. Cohen, ed. Albany: State University of New York Press. 1986. p.21.

[10] *Totality and Infinity*. p.134.

[11] Conscience, see *Totality and Infinity* p. 110. *Existence and existents*. p.25.

[12] *Totality and Infinity*. p.84.

The human encounter is the only means by which the ontological adventure of the egoistic self is both ruptured, exposed in all its ugliness, and at the same moment justified. This is because the justification for my hedonism lies not in the existence of my own needs, but in the needs of the destitute stranger. I must be free and independent, have a home and tools, food and laughter, if I am to have full hands and warm heart to extend to the stranger. Goodness without material substance is empty while spiritual goods do not fill the hungry stomach. Adriaan Peperzak expresses this succinctly:

> The legitimation of egocentric hedonism is not absolute
> but relative. If it does not submit itself to a higher law,
> it loses its innocence.[13]

All my possessions, then, are not ultimately for me, but for the stranger. This absolute giving of oneself does not come naturally to man, in fact is against all natural instincts. This is not a rational imperative, but a moral imperative. It is the emergence of the noble element in man.

Justice lies ultimately in the free abandonment of freedom, which itself invests the individual with a new and higher freedom, the freedom to be fully human, naked and destitute. The paradox of freedom lies in its synthetic bond to its own negation. Only in the arresting of one's spontaneity does the freedom of ontology become justified. Only in the loss of freedom does one become entirely free. This strange contradiction is considered in Levinas' Talmudic Reading which he entitles "The Temptation of Temptation"[14] (1964). This is a treatment of the Tractate *Shabbath* which comments on Exodus 19:17.

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[13]Adriaan Peperzak. *To The Other*. West Lafayeete, Indiana: Purdue University Press. 1993. p.24.

[14]Emmanuel Levinas. *Nine Talmudic Readings*. Annette Aronowicz, tr. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 1994. pp.30-50.

And they stopped at the foot of the mountain.

We should mention at the outset that it is part and parcel of the Jewish tradition to approach any truth, not as a cold dead eternal fact set in stone, but as a living, breathing potentiality always awaiting a renewal, a rendering contemporaneous. It is a glaring feature of the Hebrew Bible, that literary mosaic of legend and history, fact and fiction, that it blends many voices[15] and many "times" into its eternal message of *Hesed*[16].

Levinas attempts to decode the Talmudic masters' cryptic commentaries on the above passage, a further rendering contemporaneous of their truths, humbly confessing all the while his inadequacy to the task given the non-existence of any key with which to decipher their magical formulae. Levinas sees this story of the Hebrew acceptance of the covenant at the foot of the mountain as an example par excellence of the ambiguity of freedom and he juxtaposes that paradoxical freedom with the "Greek freedom" generally pursued in the modern world.

The Greek freedom is the liberty of a Ulysses. Ulysses is ready for all adventures, eager for an opportunity to prove his worth, to oppose and conquer, to establish himself as victor.

We cannot let life pass us by! We must enter history

[15]See esp. B.W.Anderson. *Understanding the Old Testament*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall. 1986. Also Harold Bloom. *The Book of J*. David Rosenburg, tr. New York: Random House. 1990. and Northrop Frye. *The Great Code*. Toronto: Academic Press. 1982.

[16]The student of the Hebrew Testament is struck by the thoroughgoing interweaving of historical study, literary development and theology that runs throughout the sacred books. These separate aspects are woven into a whole by the common theme of covenant or *Hesed*, just as the Hebrew people were bound together as one family through its common notion of God's *Hesed* toward them as his chosen people. As Nelson Gleuck points out in his comprehensive study of this elusive term (*Hesed in the Bible*. Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press. 1967.), *hesed* can take on a multitude of meanings and this makes it exceedingly difficult to render into English. These attempts at translation assume the full range (mercy, steadfast love, loyalty, goodness) and yet often fail to capture the fullness of meaning or address the essence of the term as covenant, promise or commitment. The term implies a distict loyalty especially as manifest in relationships between unequals. The *hesed* of the stronger party toward the weaker implies a loyalty of praxis, something to be done. It assumes the shape of an *act* of inner faithfulness, and therefore of grace. The Israelites understood Yahweh as having bound himself to them in just such a relationship of covenant faithfulness.

> with all the traps it sets for the pure, supreme duty
> without which no feat has any value. There would be
> no glory in triumphing in innocence, a concept defined
> purely negatively as a lack, associated with naivete and
> childhood, marking it as a provisional state.[17]

Levinas sees this attitude as definitional of the modern man's heroic approach to life. He reminds us that in the *Republic*, Plato's just but austere state is rejected as a "city of pigs" and replaced by the city which "must have everything". Western man wants to have everything. He wants to have all luxuries, all power, and, above all, all knowledge. It is knowledge which is the "temptation of temptation" for Levinas, since knowledge allows one to have access to "the evil which completes the whole and threatens to destroy everything" while at the same moment guaranteeing that safe distance which saves. Thus the ego can hear the song of the sirens, without threat of being returned to the island.

> He can brush past evil without succumbing to it,
> experience it without experiencing it, try it without
> living it, take risks in security.[18]

In joining evil to good, and in positing both as accessible through knowledge, Western man lives dangerously in the security of a world of truths. He forgets the "Luciferian origins" of knowledge, its immodesty, the unsavory joy of its possession, its abdications and incapacities. In this noble quest, the desire to understand loses its innocence, and soon degenerates into a merciless demand to bypass nothing. It refuses to accept boundaries, rejects the claim of the other to absolute otherness and insists upon incorporating him into the whole, by placing him within the context of a historical perspective, within the horizon of the All. The quest for

[17] *Talmudic Readings*. p.33.

[18] *Talmudic Readings*. p.33.

knowledge, then, describes, for Levinas, the very birthplace of violence. From Ulysses stems the sheer inability to recognize the other as unassimilable, outside of all calculation, beyond absolute certainty. Levinas insists that we find purer paths and expressly states this as the intention of the Reading[19].

The other path Levinas wishes to expose through this reading is the "Jewish way of being" which is depicted in the story of the mount. He explains that Israel is placed *below* the mountain, with the imposing rock towering above them and over them like an upturned bucket. It threatens to crush them at any moment even as they are about to receive the Torah, the gift of the law. What gift is this which is offered under threat of death? What freedom to turn down the gift if the choice offered is one between a live burial and an acceptance of the gift? The choice offered here is clearly a choice between god's way and death. Levinas uses the Hebrew expression, *eyn berera* (No choice!), to describe the dilemma of the Israelites, the dilemma of an illusional freedom inherent in the very logic of things, the ironic truth of what it is to *be*. This choice of no-choice is definitional of the human relation to god. The teaching cannot come to the human being as a result of choice; it is itself in fact that which must be received in order for choice to be possible. In the beginning, all is chaotic, law is established, then the law-bound are given freedom of choice. Israel consents to the law prior even to freedom and non-freedom, prior to any consideration of the effects of that commitment. Revelation precedes, reason follows. Even the Hebrew word for "acknowledged", *kymu*, bears a second meaning of "they fulfilled it". To receive the law is to fulfil it before even consciously accepting it.

It is obvious in this passage that the alternatives of freedom and non-freedom, of liberty

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[19] *Talmudic Readings*. pp. 33, 35.

and coercion, are not the fundamental ones. Righteousness, justice, and its ambiguous relationship to freedom lie outside the Greek structure of a knowledge which allows a choice of right action. We ultimately do because we *must* do, and receive our reasons after the fact. Our very adherence to the law of the Good is a consent outside of freedom. We sacrifice freedom in order to be just, to become the instruments of a higher justice and thus to gain a higher freedom outside the structure of freedom and coercion.

> Freedom begins in what has all the appearance of a constraint due to threat...Without being less pure than the freedom that would arise from freedom (in the non-engagement of the one who is tempted and tries his luck), the freedom taught by the Jewish text starts in a non-freedom which, far from being slavery or childhood, is a beyond-freedom.[20]

The anteriority of acceptance in relation to freedom is essential to the Levinasian view of Justice. Justice can only be realized in a non-voluntary tearing of the separated self from the safe realm of his heroic existence, and a rupture of its comfortable time and space. Ethics can only be a call from *beyond* essence, the madness of a self-sacrifice before all possibility of calculation of recompense. Only thus is meaning given *to* reality as the ontological universe accepts its subordination to the realm of the ethical. With Levinas, Justice is the movement beyond knowledge and freedom in a reversal of the normal chronology of accepting and knowing. In a doing that precedes hearing, against all logic and against all reasonable reason, Justice is realized in the fulfilling of the human destiny to be a holocaust unto the neighbour.

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[20] *Talmudic Readings*. p.40.

VII. The Problems with Levinas' Justice.

In the Levinasian view, true Justice is never to be found in the state or the courtroom, but only ever in the original face to face encounter between human beings. True justice, born in an elemental response to the needs of the destitute other, can only be described as a violent wrenching of the good act from the unwilling respondent, and ultimately involves a profound injustice to that helpless messiah, a kind of counterviolence against the violence encountered in the cold egalitarianism of the world at large. The burden of responsibility to the other is an infinite weight which grows with every response. My utter inadequacy to the moral task dictates the necessity of my continued response, even unto death. I am oppressed, I am obsessed, I am the persecuted one. I am the instrument of a divine justice which threatens to crush me with shame and guilt. To respond to such a calling makes no sense at all, yet I cannot refuse the summons since I am, in essence, divinely ordained to respond. My response is the fulfilment of my humanity. As I humble myself before the other, I stand in "society with God", an absurdity of non-meaning, and yet an overwhelming abundance of meaning about the nature of god's perfection.

> Society with God is not an addition to God or a disappear
> -ance of the interval that separates God from the creature...
> [It is a revelation.] Multiplicity and the limitation of the
> creative Infinite are compatible with the perfection of the
> Infinite; they articulate the meaning of this perfection.[1]

The glory of god turns out, in Levinas, to be an intuition of the meaning of the divine, a meaning that is other than representation, and for which I become the vehicle of manifestation.

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[1] *Totality and Infinity.* p.104.

> Glory could not become a phenomenon without entering into conjunction with the very subject to which it would appear, without closing itself up in finitude and immanence.[2]

For Levinas, it is precisely because the burden of responsibility is experienced as infinite, precisely because I am crushed under the unbearable weight of shame and utter inadequacy to the call, that the divine can become manifest. The Infinite has glory only through subjectivity as it becomes a crucial term in the human adventure through my substitution. My "witness" to god's glory is a "peace sign to the other"[3] and constitutes that unique structure which opens up an exception to the rule of Being, and reveals god.

What are we to make of the injustice of the just response? How are we to understand and value a justice so costly, so oppressive? How is it that the egocentric adventurer is the innocent, acting out his mere survival with no malicious intent, while the moral respondent is the guilty, the indebted whose ledger is never to be balanced but will fall ever deeper into arrears. Clearly, the passions dictate man's response to his world, for Levinas, but those most rapacious and uncontrolled desires purchase innocence, while conscience and retribution breed torment and shame. The natural man, pure and good, is a mere child, groping his way toward maturity, leaving a little spilled milk in his path. In good Socratic fashion, he does not knowingly do harm to others. He is, as Levinas often describes him, simply "without ears". In direct contradiction to experience, Levinas would have us believe that harm is done to the neighbour only as an oversight, a failure to notice. He would have us believe that the good act is only ever torn from us against our will.

[2]*Otherwise Than Being. p.144.*

[3]*Otherwise Than Being. p.148.*

The denial of conscious choice as an essential aspect of human action is highly problematical here. That is not to deny that it offers certain moral advantages, attempting a higher ethic than that extended by a moral imperative based on contemplation. Already precedented in Socratic humility which claims to know only that it knows nothing, the humble response of the *me voici* guarantees the soul's openness for learning, its readiness to listen to the other. And, we can readily see the need to insist that response remain prior to choice in an effort to maintain the subject's disinterestedness, to refuse, prior to action, all opportunity for calculation of advantage or disadvantage which would by necessity taint the "pure gift"[4].

Levinas sees our concern for grounding ethics in a knowledge of the Good as a profound flaw in European tradition born of a predominant tendency to "subordinate unworthiness to failure, [and] moral generosity to the necessities of objective thought"[5]. It is the very spontaneity of freedom itself that needs to be called into question, and knowledge is the greatest power and the most dangerous freedom of all. Furthermore, the claim that we are capable in advance of calculating ends of our actions is an unrealistic oversimplification of the infinite complexity of human encounter and of life in general. The very assumption that we can *know* the Good and thus think through the spontaneous encounter in advance of its occurrence to align our actions in the direction of that Good, is a mark of the *hybris* of modern Western man, and one which blinds him to the reality of the absurdity of that calculative process. Man's actions can never be clearly defined as good or bad since the manifold repercussions of each act will be multiplied infinitely

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[4]Jacques Derrida treats of this theme masterfully in his *Given Time: Counterfeit Money* (Peggy Kamuf, tr. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1992.) and his *Gift of Death* (John Leavey, Richard rand, tr. London: University of Nebraska Press. 1986.)

[5]*Totality and Infinity. p.83.*

beyond his intent and his control. Like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Derrida and Freud, Levinas is suggesting that the choice made in oblivion gives a fuller account of our decision-making.

Levinas is also telling us, with his denial of conscious choice in human action, that our very humanity means having many centres from which we approach truth. As we witness from the speech of Alkibiades at the end of the *Symposium*, a unique learning can take place in the community of love which cannot be known through rational inquiry. A crucial aspect of Alkibiades' learning, which allowed him access to very private secrets about Socrates, was a naked vulnerability and a deep-seated sense of shame. When our mode of communication is other-oriented, there is a greater openness to our own fragility and inadequacy, a humble readiness to listen and learn, and a stark awareness of the emptiness of freedom and its tendency to alienate and isolate. In a loving receptivity, our response, always fraught with uncertainty, has a greater chance of being a good one, even without the "guarantees" of knowledge.

Levinas raises many interesting and provocative questions regarding the adequacy and violence of a knowledge-based ethics, and these are not easily to be glossed over. But, in the end, must we not ask whether throwing ourselves at the feet of the other in a madness of moral messianism may not prove counterproductive to the goal of a just and happier world? Every parent knows the ease with which parenting can be performed if one merely acquiesces to the child's every whim. But we also can foresee the sheer absurdity of that method if guidance toward responsible adulthood is to be the goal. Does not a spontaneous response to the wishes of the other, and a setting aside of the necessities of reason, most often signify a rash readiness to accept the word of the other as having a prior claim upon the truth, rather than signify a responsible humility concerning all Truth? Does not the undermining of the conscious effort

toward responsible action based upon all available information and good intention constitute a move toward irresponsibility rather than humility? And, in the end, are we not ultimately obliged to agree with Martha Nussbaum when she concludes emphatically: what does not reach out to order the world does not truly love?[6] Do we really want to repeat in our own lives the tragic-comic love of an Alkibiades... comic for its Dionysian display of wanton frolic and spontaneous abandon-- tragic, not merely for its unrequitedness, the anger, pain and frustration consistent with the disordered life, but because we, enjoying the god's eye view of the observer of that future history, can see ahead to the tragic results of Alkibiades' recklessness (disgrace, exile, murder)? Alkibiades' tragic end reveals to us the self-cancelling nature of an unordered love and the non-reflective life. In this context, we can see that Levinas' call to service beyond the structure of reason normally inherent in any concept of duty can be nothing short of a call to senseless martyrdom and agonizing suffering beside which death would appear a blessing. Reason may not have exclusive access to the Good beyond Being, but reason is needed to access the truths of this world. In the real world, reason will inform the heart of the hungry man to give only half of his crust of bread to the needy stranger.

We must also entertain serious reservations concerning Levinas' sympathetic view of the self-serving ego. How is he to be held accountable for his selfishness and violence? Where decisions are depicted as wholly natural acts of instinct justified in themselves as *conatus esse*, the violence of the ego's reckless exercise of its freedom and autonomy, while acknowledged by Levinas, is yet trivialized as a mere failure to notice the other's needs. In clear contradiction to experience, unjust action is reduced to mere unawareness. With Levinas, the ego is exonerated

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[6]*Martha Nussbaum. The Fragility of Goodness. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1986. p. 199.*

of every rapacious and predatory choice by the mere fact that it is not a morally educated choice. The evil man's decisions are made by reason alone before any input from the heart. For Levinas, this is reason enough for acquittal; the murderer remains innocent of his crime. In fact, the worse he is, the more innocent he is.

This view of unlimited sympathy for the uniqueness of the individual, the infinite unknowability of the reasons for his choices, and the utter impossibility and gross injustice of understanding him through a consideration of his works, undercuts the very basis upon which moral disputes can hope to reach settlement. This is an amazing and frightening position for the philosopher labouring in the shadow of the Holocaust. It appears in fact to give license to the diabolical. The Auschwitz Guard here may come to be seen as a necessary instrument of God's glory, indeed a blessing in Deathcamp disguise, because it is he who offers the greatest occasion for us to become full moral subjects. That is to say, if it takes the other to free me from my ontological prison, it takes the Nazi guard to call forth my infinite response and bring me all the way to glory and to God. In an early essay entitled "Ego and the Totality" (1954)[7], Levinas demonstrates an acute awareness of the evil nature of the ego's adventure. He explains that the ego lives as though he occupies the "centre of Being" and were its source. However, even in this work, he concludes with the shocking acquittal of the "simply living being" (as opposed to thinking being) since he exists in mere ignorance of the exterior world. In a philosophy where true justice lies outside of Being, where the state and its laws represent an ethical violation to the moral realm of the two, we can only argue whether our actions conform to a law, all the while knowing all laws to be removed from the moral order altogether.

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[7] *Collected Philosophical Papers. pp. 25-45.*

Moreover, while absolving the evil man, is Levinas not also trivializing the sacrifice of the good man, insisting that the moral response, always prior to thought, is never knowingly undertaken? This is a serious question in a world where radical evil continually masquerades as the civilized and the cultured, where there is admittedly little recompense for good action beyond the quiet satisfaction of a clear conscience. We must ask whether Levinas is upholding the duty of the post-Holocaust philosopher if he dismisses the diabolical so lightly, if he offers so little credit to the selfless efforts of the good man. Is Levinas "dozing off" in the middle of his "night watch"?

VIII. Conclusions.

It is clear from a consideration of the works of Plato and of Levinas, and from the evidence of our everyday experience, that Justice is an elusive good, not easily discerned by man, not readily discoverable in our daily encounters. Like the other virtues, we assume we understand its meaning and its importance as an element in the good human life, yet, when challenged, we can no more reach a certain and satisfactory definition of Justice than we can of Beauty or Temperance or Love. All thinking about such goods leads inevitably back to that *aporia* which stands at the heart of all good philosophy.

Plato's attempt to wrestle with Justice raises many difficulties with definitions of the virtue, and with its application in the state at large. At the close of the *Gorgias* it is clear that the attempt must be made to discover the intrinsic good of this peculiarly human virtue, that one which permeates all the others. We may not be able to arrive at a definitive description of Justice, but certain truths do emerge during the course of this dialogue which may enlighten us. We learn from observance of the Sophist and politician that men tend toward an unholy fascination with power. Power can and usually does come to be isolated as a value in itself and this inevitably leads to deep human corruption. In frightening tones, Plato demonstrates what it is to live an examined life, what this implies for the human community, tand o what depths of moral decay an entire people can sink under corrupt leadership. Dreams of power are part of human reality, but when these dreams run over into waking life, they can create nightmares like tyranny and holocaust. In the simple and austere city of the good man and the philosopher, "the city of pigs", man can walk the narrow path without great distraction, but our earthly cities are "fevered" and "swollen", precisely because of our undisciplined desires and appetites, and

Justice is therefore a very rare commodity, and one which not only fails to guarantee success in that environment, but could be seen to guarantee failure if success is defined in material and even social terms. Thus it is through a separation of the goods of the soul from the goods of the body that Plato attempts to navigate the way of the good and just man[1].

Plato's attempt to understand Justice amounts to an overturning of the non-philosopher's truths. The non-philosopher sees custom and law grounded in an attempt to limit individual will, to ensure a secure environment in which all men may enjoy their goods in peace, essentially a truce in the war of all against all. Man, at his worst in this war, understands Justice as the law of the strongest[2]. The man on the street clearly equates power, goodness and strength, and this conviction erodes the value of good action, reducing virtue to a mere value reversal of the weak[3]. *Nomos* is established to counterbalance *physis* and allow for safe human communal living. As law decides what justice is, we are able to safeguard ourselves against our own natures.

Plato embarks upon the quest of Justice in the *Republic* with precisely these "truths" before him. It is the *Republic*'s task to establish that human nature may be corruptible but that, in its true natural and healthy state, it is not morally corrupt, and that claim implies the conviction that even the most corrupted nature can be changed. To strive for self-advantage like a predatory animal is one way of living life, but it is not the *human* way. It is the way of the beast, and, for the beastly life, certainly injustice is instrumental. However, Plato insists that the noble and healthy *human* life lived according to *human* nature is after a pattern laid up in heaven. The

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[1] *Phaedo* 67ab.

[2] *Gorgias* 488b, d.

[3] *Gorgias* 492ab, *Republic* 1.337d.

natural thing for a justly ordered soul is to be human, not beastly. The beast at best can be tamed, but the human can be perfected.

Thus the human city in *logos*, as it responds to the swollen and fevered desires of the souls within, must at times assume strange and even grotesque shapes to guide and persuade, and, when all else fails, to ultimately compel the souls toward Justice. Power *must* be given a human face again. The *techne* of Justice must employ the tools at hand to achieve this goal; the methods of the philosopher-king and the tyrant are not so very different. However, the philosopher-king is guided by the *telos* of the Good. He will build into the idea of power a defense against its misuse by redefining Justice as *techne* and redefining *techne* as value-laden. The true exercise of a craft will require the normatization of its practitioner as professional ethics is made to lie at the heart of the very definition of profession. The power of the craft will now lie in its power to do good , to serve just ends.

The non-philosopher, suffering from an ill-tuned soul, misconceives the Good as a power which will purchase earthly goods: wealth, respect, glory, position, immunity in the courts, the favour of the gods, and freedom from remorse for his sins. Plato does not merely rupture the non-philosopher's equation of power with goodness and strength, but he gives power true *human* meaning as the power to do the Good and to achieve Justice for the commonwealth[4]. Ideally, in a state of Justice, man will come to see that earthly goods are mere "appearances" of goodness and, since "no one is content with the possession of the appearance, but all men seek the reality" (*Republic* 6.505 de), he will attune his soul justly. The real Good is what every soul pursues, and for its sake alone does all that it does. With a mere intuition of its reality, and though baffled and

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[4]*Republic* 7.519d ff.

unable to apprehend its nature adequately, man is guided onward toward the true Good, and thus toward justice and true human happiness.

In the thought of Emmanuel Levinas, the difficulties with Justice seem at first overwhelming, threatening a collapse of the viability of the entire philosophy. The innocence of the evil man, the guilt of the moral respondent, the unattractiveness of the results of the good moral act, the staggering weight of moral awareness seem to speak out against the feasibility or the desirability of an attempt at right action at all. As an explanation for radical evil, the theory of the innocent ego certainly appears lacking. If intended as inspiration to turn the evil man in the direction of moral growth and worship of the Good, the restless obsession and unbearable weight of shame are hardly effective selling points of the moral realm. However, there may be another way to understand the apparent paradox of Levinasian Justice. Perhaps Levinas is not addressing himself to the amoral man at all. After all, he asks, paraphrasing Plato's central question of the *Republic*: "Would you be able to convince people who do not want to hear?"[5] Perhaps Levinas is not so much concerned with reaching the unreachable or with explaining why the evil man does what he does, as with giving the good man a reason to go on serving the Good. In a world so full of evil that self-sacrifice can be seen as utter foolishness and senseless martyrdom, where the degree of one's unscrupulousness all too often parallels the degree of his "success", good action, in fact any action at all, runs the risk of a loss of all meaning and justification. In "Humanism and Anarchy" (1968)[6], Levinas reveals how the belief in a meaning behind human existence can be turned upside down by man's atrocity to man:

[5]"Freedom and Command". (1953) *Collected Philosophical Papers*. p.18.

[6]*Collected Philosophical Papers*. p.127.

> The unburied dead in wars and extermination camps make one believe the idea of a death without a morning after and render tragic-comic the concern for oneself and illusory the pretension of the rational animal to have a privileged place in the cosmos...

Levinas understands that even the man of strong conscience who desires to do the good can become trapped in fear and hopelessness, or worse, driven to desperate and violent measures to protect himself and his loved ones. Levinas, having witnessed first-hand the horrors of the Holocaust, knows all too well the dangers of an uncontrolled individual freedom, but he also sees the difficulty (impossibility?) of limiting that freedom - that anarchy - without ourselves becoming totalitarian. With his disturbing positing of morality as a rupture in Being, Levinas may be offering a permanent method of achieving the Platonic goal, of separating power from goodness and strength. What Plato hoped to achieve by redefining Justice as the *techne* of responsible service to the whole with its built-in professional ethics and its goal of Goodness, Levinas fears will not offer sufficient safeguards against a Callicles or a Thrasymachus. Wherever there are definitions, the new tyrant can overturn the old and replace them with new meanings, designating his own truths "reasons of state" and justifying them by their political expediency. By placing the Good outside of Being, Levinas reminds us of the task of the prophet and the philosopher, to stand on the sidelines, watching the real world in its fevered struggle, offering guidance, exposing delusion, reminding us of the divine dimensions of reality. With his redefinition of human subjectivity, Levinas may be offering us the occasion to move beyond the paralysis of *ressentiment* and giving us a divine "reason" to go on serving the Good, simply because we are blessed with a conscience, simply because we recognize the Good when we *feel* it, simply because we know ourselves to be the chosen ones, called to do the Good whether it

makes sense to do so or not. In fact, it is the utter absurdity of the quest for the Good beyond Being which determines its utter necessity to our moral, and *human*, fulfilment.

Perhaps there is yet another subtle message in the infinite guilt of the moral subject. Levinas may be alerting us to the possibility that we too may not be so good and so perfect as we like to think that we are, that, in many respects, despite our supposed worship of the Good, we too may be the guilty ones. Or, an even more radical and frightening possibility is that Levinas may understand that to be fully human means to be guilty. He repeatedly quotes with approval throughout the entire corpus of his works, the words of Dostoevski from the *Brothers Karamazov*:

> We are all guilty of all, and for all men, before all,
> and I more than all the others.[7]

What Levinas is reaching for in his radical challenge to the history of philosophy is a higher ideal than can be offered by a Good confined to the structure of Being. For Levinas, only the highest ideal will suffice, one which breaks through all conscious and calculative thinking, shatters all hope of recompense, and elevates gentleness and humility as a strength beyond all reason. If it is good to feed the hungry child who deserves my leftover bread, how much the better to feed her who deserves it not, with the bread torn from my own hungry mouth?

In this metaphysics of the absurd, Justice in the state is offered, not as a means to limit the war of all against all, but as a counterbalance to the infinite gift. In *Ethics and Infinity*, Levinas offers this radical possibility as an explanation for human communal living:

> It is extremely important to know if society in the

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[7]F.Dostoevski. *The Brothers Karamazov*. Constance garnet, tr. New York: New American Library. 1957. p.264. See *Ethics and Infinity*. pp.98, 101.

> current sense of the term is a result of the limitation of the principle that men are predators of one another, or if to the contrary it results from the limitation of the principle that men are *for* one another. Does the social, with its institutions, universal forms and laws, result from limiting the consequences of the war between men, or from limiting the infinity which opens in the ethical relationship of man to man?[8]

In the work of Emmanuel Levinas, we recognize an attempt to use Plato as much as possible, building upon his strengths, discovering new meanings in the "footnotes" so eternally central to philosophy. But Levinas is also aware of the limitations of the model Plato uses, and offers to the great master's reflections some "footnotes" of his own. He proposes a radically new way of understanding the relation (or non-relation) between ethics and ontology, and in so doing, hopes to awaken a morally slumbering world to a staggering new awareness of the importance, to our very humanity, of real responsibility, of true Justice.

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[8] *Ethics and Infinity*. p.80.

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