

The Invisible Other

CHRISTOPHER KETCHAM,
3127 Woods Edge Dr.
Garnet Valley, Pa. 19060
646-418-5028
chrisketcham@msn.com

Abstract: This paper brings Gabriel Marcel and Emmanuel Levinas into dialogue through a consideration of the notion of the spirit of abstraction in Marcel and the notion of the infinitely different other in Levinas. We abstract meaning from Mona Lisa's smile from her physical portrait. It is appropriate to abstract from the baby's sound whether he or she seems to be happy or sad, but it is when we begin to abstract humans from their humanity that the spirit of abstraction is engaged. My thesis is that the spirit of abstraction is a form of *cognitively dislocated reason*. This cognitive dislocation begins with the idea that people can be abstracted into characteristics and traits and that these traits can be assigned arbitrary superiority or inferiority e.g., big nosed people have superior intellects; small nosed people do not. Marcel suggests that the spirit of abstraction can turn persons into impersonal targets that are accorded fewer or reduced rights as if they were other than other human. The result can be that inferior (dehumanized) persons are accorded one set of rights and superior (humanized) persons are accorded another set of rights. A most drastic form of the spirit of abstraction occurred during the Holocaust, when the Nazis dehumanized the Jews. Drawing on the work of Robert Solomon, I suggest that if we begin to understand that reason and passion are interchangeable, we can stand back to reconsider attitudes that produce arbitrary abstractions. The spirit of abstraction is *cognitively dissociated reason* because it redirects someone from the self-evident notion that this other is human, to this other is other-than-human, and even less-than-human because of some arbitrary condition, e.g., being small nosed. Abstraction is a necessary intellectual exercise to achieve what one intends—differentiating an edible mushroom from one that is poisonous by its color. The spirit of abstraction, on the other hand, is cognitively dislocated reason because it is a form of expediency that pre-categorizes persons without considering the individual who, for example, stands before me. What Marcel and Levinas ultimately ask us to do is to recognize this *cognitively dislocated reason* and turn the discourse from abstracting humans into categories deserving of different human rights toward a conversation that asks which human rights should apply to *all* humans.

Introduction

One can abstract personal characteristics or traits, for example, being shorted-nose, short, or red haired. It is when one abstracts human persons into categories according to their traits and then assigns value judgments based on that (arbitrary) trait or characteristic, e.g., long-nosed people are good; short-nosed people are bad that *cognitively dislocated reason* occurs in context of the spirit of abstraction. There may be other forms of *cognitively dislocated reason*, e.g., in mental illness, but this is the form that is the focus of this paper. In the spirit of abstraction, *cognitively dislocated reason* ignores the individuality of the other by correlating all individuals (e.g., members of a particular religion) into a category of otherness that abstracts from the individual some measure of that person's humanity.

Emmanuel Levinas explains that we are each infinitely alterior (different) to one another. Levinas understands the other as completely separate from me. Infinite means that the other

cannot be abstracted into a totality. There is always more to the other that I will never understand. Gabriel Marcel contends that people cannot be classified as being equal to each other because people are not objects. However, Marcel does not assign infinite alterity to the other. Rather than equality among persons or infinite otherness, Marcel accords all persons the same human rights but recognizes that human rights are difficult to define, e.g., what exactly does the human right to life mean?

The practice of the abstraction of people according to their traits and characteristics, while it may be possible and even helpful at times, conflicts with the idea that everyone is infinitely alterior to each other because abstraction by trait and/or characteristic tends to concretize the abstracted individual in the context of what has been abstracted, i.e., Joe is a short-nosed person. Joe may also be tall, smart, funny, athletic, but the moniker “short-nosed” becomes an identifying characteristic that masks or even replaces Joe’s alterity. *Cognitively dislocated reason* does not recognize the abstraction as an abstraction.

Marcel suggests that there is a tension between contemplator and contemplated in the spirit of abstraction, and quite often this tension is couched in an historical context. The slippery slope concerning the spirit of abstraction is that these traits and characteristics can be given historical significance, i.e., x-origin people are our enemies. Abstraction becomes *cognitively dislocated reason* when certain traits or characteristics are assigned arbitrary primacy over others, e.g., long nosed people are intelligent; short nosed people are not; x-origin people have short noses; therefore x-origin people are not intelligent.¹ The contemplator in the spirit of abstraction replaces the alterity of the other with the trait or characteristic which concretizes the other, or as Marcel suggests, the contemplated becomes invisible to the contemplator. Ultimately, Marcel sees the spirit of abstraction as a factor that makes (or can lead to) conflict, even war.

This paper is divided into six sections. The first outlines Marcel’s idea of abstraction; the second, is a summary of Levinas’s notion of the other. In the third section, brief thoughts about passions, resentment, and admiration are considered in the context of abstraction. Fourth, the spirit of abstraction and the thesis of its being *cognitively dislocated reason* are explicated. In section five, the concepts of the “third” in Levinas and of the masses in Marcel are introduced to help reveal possible factors of the spirit of abstraction that can lead to war. The paper concludes with a discussion and a call for additional research on these key themes in Levinas and Marcel.

Abstraction

Gabriel Marcel understands that abstraction is a necessary cognitive function to achieve a determinative purpose.² In simple terms, we differentiate the person coming out of the forest from the abstraction we call forest, the cry of the baby as representing distress or hunger, or

¹ One definition of *cognition*: “The action or faculty of knowing; knowledge, consciousness; acquaintance with a subject”; of *dislocation*: “To put out of place”; of *reason*: “To explain, support, infer, or deal with by (or as by) reasoning.” *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford, U.K.: OUP, 2009). Marcel concludes that at times the mind can yield to “a sort of fascination” that transforms the other into an “impersonal target,” and this abstraction becomes a “disease of the intelligence,” for the abstracter, “conceptual dislocation” from admiration to resentment. See Gabriel Marcel, *Man against Mass Society*, trans. G.S. Fraser (South Bend, IN.: St. Augustine's Press}, 2008), p.115, p.17, p.21. (Hereinafter *MAMS*.) This point can be restated as “a faculty of knowing that is put out of place through a kind of reasoning,” which can be encapsulated in the term used in this paper: *cognitively dislocated reason*.

² See *MAMS*, p.117.

Mona Lisa's smile as depicting arrogance or ecstasy or something else. Michel Foucault sees the abstraction of categories as a way of filtering aspects of the other in order that the other may be transcribed into language.³ For example, once we have differentiated the person (through language: there is a "person") from the forest, we then further transcribe by language (abstract) whether the person is an open-armed friend or weapon-carrying foe. Our simple abstractions from person to friend or foe can help us react accordingly, and so deal with reality.

However, not all abstractions are so simple. Another person sees a white-skinned man with open arms come out of the forest and abstracts "friend"; he sees a black-skinned man with open arms come out of the same forest and abstracts "foe." With abstraction, the simpler is derived from the more complex; but at what cost, asks Levinas? If we are responsible for all others, asks Levinas, what purpose does such a categorical abstraction as black or white serve? Brian Treanor's critique of Levinas and abstraction considers this very problem:

The problem is not that Levinas engages in abstraction in order to look more clearly at the otherness of the other and the egoism of the self. The problem lies in the fact that he fails to adequately reunify these two aspects of the relationship in a way that acknowledges the original abstraction as abstraction.⁴

It is reasonable for Levinas to say we abstract self from other. To a certain extent, one must "escape" one's self-contemplating ego to contemplate the other. However, there is tension between the notions of self and other which Treanor rightly suggests must be examined. I suggest that one consequence of Treanor's complaint about not acknowledging the abstraction as abstraction comes in the form of the spirit of abstraction where *cognitively dislocated reason* is used to create an abstraction that does not consider the individual, only the other as a member of an arbitrary "class" of otherness. This is also one of Marcel's complaints about the spirit of abstraction. However, because Levinas fails to reunify the two aspects of the relationship, there is tension between the notions of self and other which we will examine in the next section.

The Other in Levinas

The Whole Person

From where does the tension (of which Marcel speaks) arise between the "whole" of the contemplator and "whole" of the contemplated?⁵ To consider this question we must explore the idea of the "whole" of a person. "What is the whole of a person?" asks Levinas. Throughout the canon of western philosophy, culminating in Martin Heidegger's notion of *being*, Levinas explains that the whole of the person has been most often considered through an ontological lens, "Western philosophy has most often been an ontology: a reduction of the other to the same by interposition of a middle and neutral term that ensures the comprehension of being." Levinas explores one such middle term, freedom: "It is hence not a relation with the other as such but the reduction of the other to the same. Such is the definition of freedom: to maintain oneself against

³ See Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), p.135.

⁴ Brian Treanor, *Aspects of Alterity: Levinas, Marcel, and the Contemporary Debate*, ed. John D. Caputo, *Perspectives in Continental Philosophy* (New York: Fordham U. P., 2006), p.206.

⁵ See *MAMS*, p.118.

the other, despite every relation with the other to ensure the autarchy of an I.”⁶ The reduction of the other to the same is a form of abstraction that reduces otherness to I’ness. This, as we will see, produces a crucial problem for Levinas who understands that the other is infinitely anterior or different from “me.” For Levinas, the anterior other transcends being.

Levinas’s insight is that traditional Western philosophy and, therefore, its approach to ethics, has been oriented toward the I. Levinas understands ethics in a different way—that ethics begins in the other, and with my responsibility for the other. To restate the orientation of ethics in this way he needs to undo the idea of “the other into the same.” Much of his work in *Totality and Infinity* is concerned with defining what Marcel calls “the whole of a person.”

Levinas’s “whole of a person” is a complexity beyond comprehension because of the infinite nature of the other and the never completed nature of the I.⁷ We might relate Levinas to Immanuel Kant with his oft quoted, “[t]hat we can have cognition of no object as a thing in itself....”⁸ If the I or other cannot be cognized completely because of their infinite natures, then one cannot reduce “the other into the same” without abrogating the infinite alterity of both.⁹ The infinitely different other who stands before me cannot ever be objectively defined, and correspondingly, no “definition” of the other could be adequate. The other is always subjective. However, the spirit of abstraction employs the passions to categorize and abstract the other. Marcel explores just how one can use *cognitively dissociated reason* to abstract the other from the other’s infinity in an attempt to objectify what is not objectifiable. He then explores how humans have used abstraction to perpetrate atrocities like the Holocaust.

The Locus of the I

Levinas notes, “It is in order that alterity be produced in being that a ‘thought’ is needed and that an I is needed.” He then offers that: “Alterity is possible only starting from me.”¹⁰ How is this different from other into the same? He elaborates: “The alterity, the radical heterogeneity of the other, is possible only if the other is other with respect to a term whose essence is to remain at the point of departure, to serve as *entry* into the relation, to be the same not relatively but absolutely. *A term can remain absolutely at the point of departure of relationship only as I.*”¹¹ For there to be an “absolute” other there must be an I to begin this thought. One of Treanor’s complaints about Levinas’s absolute other is that, “Otherness is not absolute, it is relative; it is the crossing of (absolute) alterity and similitude. Some others are more other and less similar than other others, but no other is absolutely other.”¹² Treanor is right to be concerned about the

⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (New York: Springer, 1969), p.43. (Hereinafter *TI*.)

⁷ That is, until the end of experience. As Heidegger notes, because we can never experience our own death we never come to a conclusion or a sense of being fully complete because this condition cannot be experienced. Even after we are gone others must reconstruct our historicity hermeneutically which itself will most likely never be completed. Further discussion of these points is beyond the scope of this paper.

⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (Boston, New York: Palgrave, 2007), p.114.

⁹ Brian Treanor explains, “[t]hat the other and I can never form a totality.” And, that “[t]he other as presence – is *de facto* beyond my ability to grasp” (Treanor, *Aspects of Alterity*, p.72, emphasis in original). Treanor also points out that Marcel shows that, “In deprecating the other I deprecate myself (p.74).” Thus, in the act of abstraction the infinite alterity of both is compromised.

¹⁰ *TI*, 40.

¹¹ *TI*, 36. Emphasis in original.

¹² Treanor, *Aspects of Alterity*, p.207.

idea of an absolute “wholly other.” He says about Levinas’s idea of the absolute other that, “If we say anything about the other, the other is no longer the other, for the other must remain absolutely other in order to remain other at all.”¹³ The other can never be me, so the other is absolutely other. At the same time, while this other is (absolutely) separate from me, the other is also infinitely other. Absolute implies separation, but infinite otherness implies relativity that can be both different and similar. It is this tension between the other who is separate from the same (me) and the other who can be both similar and different that makes defining the relationship between me and the other paradoxical. However, there are two concerns with Treanor’s idea of “more or less similar.” The first is that Levinas is making the point that if everyone is infinitely alterior, then to abstract aspects of otherness abrogates that alteriority. Second, any abstraction, even if it is to discover commonality, can lead to the belief that the abstraction adequately represents the real, when in fact it is just an abstraction. This is the tension between abstraction aimed at increased understanding and the spirit of abstraction that produces *cognitively dislocated reason*. The I called “me” is an abstraction from the human that I am. It is the interruption of the abstracted self (me) that Levinas regards as a beginning of the understanding of otherness.

Edith Wyschogrod explains the pivotal concept of the I: “To be I is neither to be a sequence of alterations reborn at every instant nor an unchanging essence, but rather that which reidentifies itself in embracing the heterogeneous content it thinks and represents. What is more, and in conformity with Husserl’s phenomenological account, the I bends back upon itself and, in this self-apprehension overcomes its first naiveté.”¹⁴ The thought of the other requires the same (me) but the same always returns a bit different with each encounter with the other. Nor does the same ever disappear into the other; the same bends back into itself when it acquires new information. No longer is this the abstracted self of the in-dwelling ego but someone who gains difference in the infinitude of otherness. We share ourselves with others and others share with us.

Abstracting from the infinite other produces Levinas’s concern that the other can become totalized through the act of abstraction and be considered something less because of this abstraction. The nature of Marcel’s critique of abstraction is that we can begin to assign value to the abstraction and to accord to it a certain primacy. Levinas further notes that the relation with the other is “enacted” in conversation, and that “The relation between the same and the other, metaphysics, is primordially enacted as conversation, where the same, gathered up in its ipseity as an “I,” as a particular existent unique and autochthonous, leaves itself.”¹⁵ While alterity begins with “me,” the one who begins the conversation by “leaving *ipseity*,” the other is never reduced to the same even in conversation with “me.”¹⁶ This conversation does not reduce the other into the same as does a philosophy of immanence; rather the other remains infinitely other.¹⁷ A process where the other is reduced to the same produces a lie because the other cannot be so

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.214.

¹⁴ Edith Wyschogrod, *Crossover Queries: Dwelling with Negatives, Embodying Philosophy's Others* (New York: Fordham U.P., 2006), p.176.

¹⁵ *TI*, p.39.

¹⁶ Eric Severson defines *ipseity* as a kind of “independent selfhood”; see Severson, *Levinas's Philosophy of Time* (Pittsburgh,PA.: Duquesne U.P., 2013), p.275. Wyschogrod defines *ipseity* as “[m]y ipseity, ‘the sameness of myself, is constituted post hoc through my relation to the other’...”; see her essay, “Language and Alterity in the Thought of Levinas,” in S. Critchley and R. Bernasconi (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge U.P., 2002), p.193.

¹⁷ I will not attempt in this paper to explore the important but difficult concepts of Levinas’s neologisms, “saying” and “said.”

abstracted. Even the same who postulates such an abstraction can never totalize the same and the other, as Levinas says, because—contrary to Kierkegaard— “It is not I who resist the system...it is the other.”¹⁸

Once persons are made into objects they can be totalized into categories and either assigned human rights or have these rights expunged because of an unambiguous understanding of the categories.¹⁹ Marcel is right to be worried that loss of human rights can lead to atrocities, or even war. It is the pivotal “I” that begins this non-correlational relationship. Levinas explains: “The I is not a being that always remains the same, but is the being whose existing consists in identifying itself, in recovering its identity throughout all that happens to it.”²⁰ Western philosophy has tried to reduce the other into the same. If the other is infinitely different, how can this reduction be possible? Nor is the same ever the same because even as the I retains identity, the being that considers its “I-ness” changes. This pivotal I means that in any direction out from “I-ness,” otherness can never be brought back into the same. I cannot possess the other. The other, therefore, is always different and non-correlate: other than its infinite alterity.

Levinas’s infinite other refutes the notion that humans are correlates of each other. Marcel’s spirit of abstraction and “disease of the intelligence” begins when someone accepts the lie that humans can be categorized (abstracted) and the resulting persons who are abstracted are simple correlates of each other. Once abstracted, all who are so categorized can then be assigned identical characteristics such as inferior, dangerous, or other undesirable characteristic.

Passions, Admiration, and Resentment

Marcel refers to the spirit of abstraction as “a disease of the intelligence” but suggests that neither “disease” nor “intelligence” conveys the right meaning. To begin with, Marcel thinks that rather than being located in intelligence, somehow this “disease of the intelligence” has its origins in the passions.²¹ How are passions and disease connected?

Robert C. Solomon on Passions

Passions, according to Solomon, involve both *judgments* and *reason*. He contends that: “[t]here is no ultimate distinction between reason and passion, that reason and passion together are the means of “constituting,” not merely understanding, the world.” According to Solomon, “[t]o understand a passion is to be in a position to change it.”²² Marcel’s concern is with judgment (reason) gone astray, the cognitive dislocation of the other into abstraction where one assigns arbitrary primacy to categories of characteristics that in their arbitrariness have no rational reason for being so assigned. Yet, as Solomon explains, abstractions from the passions can turn everydayness into stories we not only believe, but also that encourage us to focus on

¹⁸ *TI*, p.40.

¹⁹ In the spirit of abstraction, the same abstracts the other into categories of same and other through the dialectic of the lie. This conceptual dislocation is in danger of denying, for example, the equality of persons.

²⁰ *TI*, p.36.

²¹ *MAMS*, p.121.

²² Robert C. Solomon, *The Passions* (Indianapolis, IN.: Hackett, 1993), pp.7–8.

these abstractions to explain our world.²³ Marcel suggests that in the extreme, we focus our attention on eliminating the object of our passions through extermination or war where, “[I] lose all awareness of the individual reality of the being whom I may be led to destroy.”²⁴ If we accept Solomon’s idea that there is “ultimately no distinction between reason and passion,” then it would be difficult to separate reason and passion from how both are expressed in any situation. The question that arises is how is change of the passions applied? Marcel shows how the passions through the “logic” of abstraction can make the other an “impersonal target.”²⁵ For example, in war, once the other is abstracted, made impersonal and a target, then the impersonal “its” (rather than “his/her”) destruction, death, and elimination can be logically accepted. If the other is infinitely different, then the spirit of abstraction involves a form of *cognitively dislocated reason*. The question arises how this distorted reasoning can come about and what psychological processes are at work here? For answers it is important to turn to consider the concepts of admiration, envy, and resentment.

Admiration, Envy, and Resentment

Psychologists Niles van de Ven and Marcel Zeelenberg, and behavioural economist Rik Pieters, contrast envy with admiration: “First, benign envy feels frustrating, while admiration is a pleasant feeling. Second, benign envy was found to lead to action tendencies aimed at improving one’s own situation, while admiration was not.”²⁶ In the *cognitively dislocated reason* of the spirit of abstraction, envy can contribute toward improving one’s situation at the expense of the abstracted others, as did the Nazis when they stole the wealth of the Jews. Admiration for others, like those who have abstracted themselves as a superior class does not lead to improvement because superiority over the abstracted other has already been secured. If the Nazis envied the Jews’ wealth so much as to take it, how did they also come to resent the Jew at the same time? Van de Ven, et al. argue that, “[a] core difference between envy and resentment is that the latter is caused by a perceived moral transgression while the former is not.”²⁷ If one can judge oneself morally superior to the abstracted other this can lead to resentment of the other as morally inferior, even to where the other is not human and therefore can be made into an “impersonal target.”

In their study of envy and resentment, Van de Ven et al conclude that “The difference in events that elicit malicious envy or resentment can be found in who is to blame for the undeserved situation: if the other is to blame resentment will be elicited, if the circumstances are to blame than malicious envy is more likely.”²⁸ This transference of resentment to the other is consistent with Marcel’s use of the term resentment in the context of his discussion of the spirit of abstraction.²⁹ Solomon explains that resentment, “[r]elishes every misfortune that inflicts its enemies, through whatever means or circumstances and whatever their desert or warrant.”³⁰

²³ *Ibid.*, p.194.

²⁴ *MAMS*, p.117.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Niels van de Ven, Marcel Zeelenberg, and Rik Pieters, "Appraisal Patterns of Envy and Related Emotions," *Motivation and Emotion* 36, no. 2 (2012): p.198.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.198.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.202–03.

²⁹ The difference between envy and resentment in the context of the spirit of abstraction and its potential for devolution into war and/or atrocities deserves further discussion. For example, one might envy the water resources of the people in a neighboring village. If the neighboring village does not share its water, that could be considered a

While resentment as a passion is a kind of reason, what Marcel sees is that the spirit of abstraction, with its categorical separation and arbitrary primacy, comes from a kind of *cognitively dislocated reason* that begins with the acceptance of people as objects capable of being categorized by various traits—the poisoning of subjectivity. The lie of abstraction begins in the poisoning of subjectivity

The Spirit of Abstraction and the Idea of Equality

With the abstract concept of *equality*, Marcel begins to guide us in a more comprehensible direction. He explains that the idea of equality does not apply to persons because persons are not objects. Rather, equality is an abstract idea that involves the rights of people, but not people themselves.³¹ We do not have to take the erroneous step of abstracting people into categories to consider equality; we need only to define what rights people should be accorded. If all persons are human even though they are infinitely different, the task becomes that of determining just what are the rights of humans.

The Fallacy of The Spirit of Abstraction

We abstract many things in order to live and function in society and the world. We abstract from the facial expression of an infant the subjective notions of happiness and sadness. Yet, we cannot know for certain what the infant feels. Levinas explains that while we can abstract ideas, concepts and theories, it is impossible to abstract people into categories because of our individual infinite alterity that never coalesces into a singularity. An abstraction can never constitute an infinitely different other. Skin color, religion, and national origin differentiate but do not define otherness. It is when any one of these is abstracted and given an arbitrary definition that the spirit of abstraction is engaged, when, for example, those members of a particular religion are deemed correlates of each other. The I and the other are not simple correlates, meaning we cannot read the I and the other from left to right and back again as if they are reversible. If they were, says Levinas, “[t]hey would complete one another in a system visible from the outside. The intended transcendence would be thus reabsorbed into the unity of the system, destroying the radical alterity of the other.”³² Therefore, while we can accord difference to the other which the other has in infinite abundance, we cannot abstract the person from being infinitely different because that would totalize the other into a category that no longer possesses infinite otherness. For example, the Nazis totalized the Jews into a category of non-person and non-citizen. As undesirable non-persons who were in the country illegally, Nazi-fomented envy and resentment were used to justify both theft and murder.

moral transgression leading to resentment. It is not difficult to imagine how the second village could be abstracted by the first and passionately dehumanized to the point where the first village invades the second to take its water supply. Moral indignation can be whipped up by derogatory rhetoric that implants false ideas into the minds of the populous. The furious rhetoric of the Nazis against the Jews fomented envy and resentment of the Jews and resulted in a change of the passions that ultimately lead to the Holocaust.

³⁰ Solomon, *The Passions*, p.290.

³¹ *MAMS*, p.120.

³² *TI*, pp.35-36.

Equality, on the other hand, does not mean that individuals can be substituted for each other even though we are all entitled to the same human rights. Rather, as Levinas notes, the I and the other are irreversible, but this irreversibility does not contain the simple meaning of, “[t]hat the same goes unto the other differently than the other unto the same.”³³ If this were the case, then we would be able to place ourselves outside of the system to observe this, once again collapsing radical alterity into the same. The correlation is invisible to us because we cannot escape to the outside to observe it. Brian Schroeder has put the point this way: “It would seem that Levinasian irreversibility implies an essential disjunction of the terms subject-object, self-other...”³⁴ The other, as Treanor has explained, is not wholly other. However, *every* other is infinitely alterior...the same only in one’s infinite alterity.³⁵ Abstracting the identical other (in its infinite alterity) then becomes an impossibility on its face.³⁶ Second, we can never observe the system of correlates from outside because we are always already within the system.

Are the Passions the Location of the Spirit of Abstraction?

If Levinas is correct, then we need to inquire whether the passions might be the location of the spirit of abstraction? Any abstraction that follows from the notion that, for example, people who believe in this religion are correlates of each other is a false premise. One who begins with a false premise does not necessarily gain that premise through a passionate reflection.³⁷ At this point in the discussion, we can say that while the passions are a tantalizing

³³ *TI*, p.36.

³⁴ Brian Schroeder, "Reversibility and Irreversibility: Paradox, Language and Intersubjectivity in Merleau-Ponty and Lévinas," *Symposium* 1, no. 1 (1997): p.68.

³⁵ See, *TI*, p.36.

³⁶ The problem of the infinite runs into the principle of non-contradiction which is exemplified in the debate between Kant and Hegel, summarized thus by Michael DePaul and Simon Skempton: “Kant assumes that when contradictions occur they can only be in the mind and not in the world, whereas Hegel maintains that contradictions are real.” (Simon Skempton, “Transcendence and non-Contradiction,” *Journal of Philosophical Research*, 2016, 41, p.36.) The importance of this dialectic is that Hegel exemplifies the problem of Marcel’s abstraction and its concretization of the infinite. DePaul and Skempton explain: “When considered as something one-sided, as something abstracted and isolated from the finitude it is opposed to, the infinite takes the form of both an endless progress or regress toward the unreachable and of something that is bounded by its excluded opposite, the finite. This infinite is a spurious infinite, because it is finite. It never goes beyond the bounds of finitude and is itself bounded by the finitude it excludes, a binding that renders it finite, a finite infinite” (p.36). Within Hegelian logic, if the other is truly infinitely alterior, the suggestion that all short-nosed persons are evil through the spirit of abstraction isolates the others, the other infinite others, who are then bound by the finitude of short-nosed persons making these infinitely alterior others finite. Simple abstraction, e.g., short nosed vs. non-short-nosed, while it separates one from the other, does not necessarily stifle the dialogue that is necessary to maintain a discourse of the abstracted within the infinite. DePaul and Skempton summarize the Hegelian dialectic: “This infinite is the infinite within the finite, the truth of all finite determinations, the immanent self-transcendence of what is finite in the very act of its determination, the constitution of an identity through the incorporation of its opposite” (p.36). Simple abstraction does not by itself make the infinite finite; it is when the discourse is stifled by the spirit of abstraction that such concretization occurs. DePaul and Skempton’s discussion of the intersection of Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, Levinas and Priest concerning transcendence and non-contradiction deserves additional consideration in connection with the implications of infinity-limiting abstractions.

³⁷ Features and characteristics such as short-nosed or funny are abstractions of physical identification, personality, or behavior but are they abstractions of humanity? Humanity cannot be adequately abstracted from a human being. A second step is required and that is to give the characteristic or feature an additional meaning that will separate and segregate persons from each other in a way that is not connected directly with the feature or

direction to consider when determining the origins of the spirit of abstraction, we are still at a point where we can only consider the spirit of abstraction as what Marcel called a “conceptual dislocation,” and this conceptual dislocation, as we have discovered from Levinas, is brought about by an incorrect premise of simple correlativity.³⁸

Marcel Provides Clues About Passions

As we have seen so far from Marcel, equality is an abstract concept, not a condition of people. Levinas explains that the simple correlation of people is false; however, Marcel shows us that if this simple correlation is accepted as true it can therefore follow that abstraction is possible. The spirit of abstraction begins in the belief of the simple correlation of people to each other. However, the devolution of abstraction into the passions is a more complex undertaking. Marcel offers us some pointers which we will accept as clues and later analyse further through Levinas’s “third” to gain a better understanding of the intervening processes that complicate relationships among people. Marcel’s first clues are his thoughts against the Marxist critique of art—that one can subordinate art to the economics current at the time of the art’s creation. This deprecatory reduction begins in resentment, “[t]hat is to say, in passion, and at bottom it corresponds to a violent attack directed against the sort of integrity of the real.”³⁹ This attack Marcel says begins in “a spirit of exclusion” and “[a] reverence toward the past and toward tradition as a kind of storehouse of divine and human wisdom...”⁴⁰

We hear this same valorisation of the past in recent slogans such as “Make America great again” and “We want our country back; vote leave.” Slogans that come from rhetoric plumbed from the depths of historical resentment become formulations for the enabling of abstraction. The political, whether party, religious sect, or other abstracted category of persons, then are empowered by the abstraction to continue the discourse. Ultimately, Marcel warns that in a devolution of abstraction into war, “[i]t is very necessary from the point of view of those who are influencing me that I lose all awareness of the individual reality of the being whom I may be led to destroy.”⁴¹ The categorical other as defined by the abstraction e.g., communist or Muslim is not only made into the source of resentment but the individual other of this abstraction is made invisible. Marcel does not attribute this resentment to the conscious mind but, “[t]hat the element of resentment in human nature is profoundly linked to a tendency to conceptual dislocation—in this, lying at the opposite pole to the element of admiration.”⁴²

Bipolarity implies reversibility. This “conceptual dislocation” of reversibility Levinas explains with, “The metaphysician and the other do not constitute a simple correlation, which would be reversible. The reversibility of a relation where the terms are indifferently read from

characteristic in and of itself. For example, Joe is short-nosed is a simple factual statement. “Because Joe is short-nosed he is also an enemy” is a judgment statement that separates Joe from others and from me. Certainly, knowing who an enemy is and who is not is important. What deserves further consideration and discussion is when the distinction of enemy and friend are extrapolated, not from evidence that they are either, but from characteristics that do not necessarily mean that one is an enemy or friend. This change from characteristic or feature, e.g., short-nosed from physical attribute to a defining characteristic of otherness which contains meaning other than the characteristic or feature, is the transition that begins the process toward which the spirit of abstraction is possible. How this occurs deserves further study.

³⁸ *MAMS*, p.117.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

left to right and from right to left would couple them the one to the other; they would complete one another in a system visible from the outside.”⁴³ While the simple correlation of people implies reversibility, the more complex correlation that Levinas proposes implies irreversibility, which would make the reversible correlation of resentment and admiration difficult to apply to human rational thought. Marcel is wise to consider this bipolarity to be a “conceptual dislocation.”

Does the origin of this “conceptual dislocation” begin with the thousands of years of Western rhetoric that Levinas contends continues to reduce the other into the same, or is this something more fundamental and primordial? He gives tantalizing clues that the ethics of responsibility to the other is pre-originary, meaning that it is before consciousness, ego, or even reasoning. Toward this end Levinas says that, “The good is before being.”⁴⁴ As Michael L. Morgan explains, “What Levinas means, in this instance, is that the moral normativity that the face-to-face brings to all of our daily lives, all of our ordinary experiences, is always already in place, prior to anything that we do or anything that happens to us. It has a kind of a priori character; Levinas calls it “anarchic,” in the sense that it is there always prior to any *archai* (principles, origins) or foundations.”⁴⁵ This pre-originary condition, Wyschogrod notes, is “In Levinas’s account, the passive, preoriginary self of ipseity is a living system, one for which not love but a preoriginary openness to the other who cannot be conceptualized is the condition of ethics.”⁴⁶ These are important observations because if we ignore, suppress, or make invisible the other because of the spirit of abstraction, have we not also made mute the conditions of and for ethics?

If Levinas is correct about this “anarchic” good coming before being, then can we make the case with Marcel, “[t]hat the element of resentment in human nature is profoundly linked to a tendency to conceptual dislocation—in this, lying at the opposite pole to the element of admiration.” The dislocation of the “contemplative spirit” by the spirit of abstraction, Marcel worries, is related to the devolution of humans into “masses” where, “Such realized abstractions are in some sense pre-ordained for the purposes of war...”⁴⁷ Placing the abstraction of humans (beings) before the good (dislocation), it seems, leads us closer to the realization that human abstractions themselves (and not just that of equality between humans) contain a lie that can lead to the creation of masses who can be deprecated with impunity and, as Marcel suggests, this can devolve further toward war and/or the complete withdrawal of human rights from the “abstracted” “masses.”

The Relationship Between Lying, Abstraction and War

Marcel wonders (which I paraphrase), “Where is the origin of assigning primacy to this category of person (white) over another category of person (black)”? He undertakes this investigation into the question of primacy to determine “[t]he exact relationship between lying

⁴³ *TI*, p.35.

⁴⁴ The full quote is: “This antecedence of responsibility to freedom would signify the Goodness of the Good: the necessity that the Good choose me first before I can be in a position to choose, that is, welcome its choice. That is my pre-originary susceptiveness. It is a passivity prior to all receptivity, it is transcendent. It is an antecedence prior to all representable antecedence: immemorial. The Good is before being.” *Otherwise Than Being*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburg, PA.: Duquesne U.P. 1974), p.122. (Emphasis in original).

⁴⁵ Michael L. Morgan, *Levinas's Ethical Politics* (Bloomington, IN.: Indiana U.P., 2016), p.47.

⁴⁶ Edith Wyschogrod, *Crossover Queries*, p.188.

⁴⁷ *MAMS*, p.117 and p.118.

and abstraction.”⁴⁸ He links war to lying both to oneself and to the other. If we can discover what the relationship is between the lie and the spirit of abstraction, I suggest a follow-up question: “Is there a relationship between lie, abstraction, and war?”

The relationship between lie, abstraction and war is associated with the abstract notion of equality applied *between* persons. For Marcel, as has already been noted, equality cannot be a quality of humans because humans cannot be considered as objects like triangles. He observes: “To say to another person: “you are my equal,” is really to place oneself outside the actual conditions which make concrete apprehension possible for such beings as ourselves. Unless, of course, one merely means to say, “You have the same rights as myself,” which is a merely juridical and pragmatic formula, whose metaphysical content it is almost impossible to elucidate.”⁴⁹ The abstraction of abstract equality as a quality attributed to persons is the source of the lie. It is, rather, human rights that are the postulates of equality. Yet, according to Marcel, human rights themselves are gravid with content for which elucidation is almost impossible. What, for example, is the full meaning and application of the right to life?

Following in the footsteps of this mistaken notion of equality among persons is the mistaken notion that we can abstract persons into categories as objects and then assign arbitrary value to these objects. It follows, then, that these mistaken categories can be set to work in what Marcel calls “the spirit of abstraction” that asserts an arbitrary primacy of one category over another. This does not automatically mean that when one abstracts others into categories, one category always will be assigned arbitrary primacy or that any arbitrary primacy leads directly to conflict or war. When one sees a person coming out of the forest waving a weapon (to which one assigns superior status because one has no weapon oneself)...this is by no means an assignment of arbitrary primacy. More is required than simple abstraction and primacy assignment. The passion of resentment, making the abstracted other invisible, along with the reification of the past, and, one’s people, one’s state, one’s political party—the people one agrees with and with whom one abstracts arbitrarily as primacy all combine to make, “[t]he claim of me that I commit myself to a warlike action against other human beings whom I must, as a consequence of my commitment, be ready to destroy...”⁵⁰ These are the conditions of abstraction that Marcel suggests can produce war and human atrocities.

The person who comes out of the forest I recognize as a person. That person may be dressed like a hiker or emerge with a loaded gun pointed at me. A correct reading of these situations is necessary for survival. It is also the case that I might make an incorrect judgment. The hiker may be a suicide bomber, and the person with a loaded gun an undercover officer who is suspicious of everyone in the forest. What does not change is that I recognize each person as a person. If, however, both are persons of color and in my village persons of color are abstracted as not only being bad persons, but dangerous persons who deserve to be shot with the pistol I carry, am I not engaging in the spirit of abstraction? My observation of the other is influenced by this arbitrary abstraction which may cause me to act irrationally where otherwise I would not if the persons were not persons of color. On the other hand, it is important for me as a parent to abstract hunger from the cry of the infant so that I can act responsibly toward her.

Similarly, even though I recognize the person coming through the forest as a person without precondition, I know there in an escaped convict loose in the area. I am therefore justified in being suspicious of anyone I do not know emerging from the forest and will

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p.115.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.156.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.117.

legitimately abstract from that appearance the possibility of existential threat. On the other hand, if my village assigns the category of evil to persons of color arbitrarily and mistakenly, it is then that we have assigned as arbitrary and morally problematic abstraction. Should we make it our village's mission to rid the world (even if only of those near our village) of all persons of color, we begin the path toward war and human atrocities based upon an arbitrary abstraction.

The fracturing of humans into categories, as Marcel postulates, produces the iniquities of deprecation that, “[h]as as its basis resentment, that is to say, in passion...” The basis of this deprecation is resentment, “[a]nd at bottom it corresponds to a violent attack against the integrity of the real...”⁵¹ The real of Germany in the nineteen twenties was hyperinflation. The Nazis came to power through resentment of the Allies who had heaped upon Germany reparations after the armistice that ended World War I. While this resentment eventually led to the Second World War, the Nazis also abstracted Jews as internal scapegoats and so as targets for both resentment and envy. The passions fuelled by this resentment and envy led to the Holocaust. Marcel explains the Holocaust as, “[t]he systematic violation of the most elementary actual rights.”⁵² With this explanation, Marcel connects lie, abstraction, and war. Where is the origin of the lie? The origin Marcel locates in the passions. However, the question he begins to formulate can be paraphrased as, “How does the contradiction between human rights and their violation come about through the spirit of abstraction?”

The Mechanics of the Lie

Marcel explains that as part of the mechanics of the lie, the abstractor must lose awareness of the individual other. In the spirit of abstraction, somehow the mind loses awareness of the individual's “spirit” (the inner quality or nature of the person), and what remains is the categorical other, e.g., short-nosed. Marcel does not see this as something our mind consciously performs. Rather he sees the spirit of abstraction as arising from something deeper in the human psyche related to the tension between resentment and admiration. This tension he says is, “[b]etween the whole of the person who contemplates and the whole of the contemplated person.”⁵³

A Return to Subjectivity

Levinas informs us that we cannot assign a specific value, definition or description to either the contemplator or contemplated because each is *infinitely* alterior or different. Are we then left with a dilemma of abstraction that cannot ever be fully resolved because the abstraction contains the lie of omission of I'ness or otherness simply because neither can ever be fully articulated? As a result, is the rational abstraction of the other into a discrete category doomed from the beginning?

Reason and rational thinking begin to break down in Marcel's so-called “disease of the intelligence” when one is confronted with a dilemma for which there are infinite dimensions on both sides. We cannot escape the paradox of infinity that it is ultimately not definable either as a thing in itself or as a method of contemplation that can be grasped by the human mind.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p.116.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p.121.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p.118.

The Origin of the Lie of Abstraction

The lie of abstraction originates in the fact that the infinite requires more of language than language can give and as a result one always must abstract from an infinite that exceeds what can be contemplated by humans. However, the remainder or the abstracted: that which Marcel encompasses in his spirit of abstraction, can approach but never reach the infinite in scope or understanding. By omission of that which is necessary but that which exceeds the abstraction (the infinite), one begins in a lie.⁵⁴ With the idea of Levinas's infinite other we are left with a distribution of abstraction possibilities with endless tails at both ends of resentment and admiration, to the ∞^{th} standard deviation.⁵⁵ We never reach unity or correlation in any abstraction because both are impossible in an infinite other. Therefore, the abstraction (in the context of Marcel's spirit of abstraction) is ultimately a futile exercise and a lie.

Marcel reminds us that such abstractions of the human are not possible because humans are not objects. Yet in the spirit of abstraction the contemplator and contemplated are somehow abstracted and encapsulated into something comprehensible by the mind. Is this a disease of the intelligence or something else?

The "Disease" of Abstraction

Disease in the context of the intelligence is not related to IQ or other measures. If disease involves symptoms, then is the spirit of abstraction a symptom of disease? Or, is the metaphor at best a stretch? Marcel is correct that the word disease is useful but inadequate when it comes to understanding the spirit of abstraction considering the indefinable other. If we begin with reason and not with infinity then we can begin to understand that Marcel's "disease" metaphor is useful, even in the shadow of understanding that the infinite looms in the background. I certainly do recognize that even this approach to "disease" is an abstraction, and abstractions as Marcel suggests, are necessary but at times perilous. However, we have already explored how fruitless it

⁵⁴ This denial of that which exceeds the abstraction is an example of Sartre's bad faith. As David Detmer explains it, "[b]ad faith requires that I both know the truth (so that my denial of it constitutes a lie, rather than a mere error), and not know it (so that I am genuinely deceived)." (David Detmer, *Sartre Explained*, Kindle ed. {Chicago, IL.: Open Court Press, 2008}, Location 1339). In the context of Marcel, this may be the manifestation of the "disease of intelligence" or the "conceptual dislocation" of the real. Levinas considers responsibility to the other to be unlimited and this is a pre-originary idea before consciousness and the ego. If that is the case, then the contradictory statement that Detmer offers may constitute a "disease of the intelligence" that conceptually dislocates the real for the passions—and proceeds in that denial toward a condition where the person who engages these passions accepts the lie as real.

⁵⁵ Marcel referred to Max Scheler who "threw light on" the idea of resentment. Actually, Scheler used the term *ressentiment* which he borrowed from Nietzsche and others before him. Manfred Frings defined *ressentiment* in this way: "Ressentiment is an incurable, persistent feeling of hating and despising which occurs in certain individuals and groups. It takes root in equally incurable *impotencies* or weaknesses that those subjects constantly suffer from. These impotencies generate either individual or collective, but always negative, emotive attitudes." (Max Scheler, *Ressentiment*, trans. Lewis B. Coser {Milwaukee, WI.: Marquette U.P., 1994}, p.5.) An example in the case of the *individual* might be the resentment experienced by the victim toward the schoolhouse bully. A *collective* form of resentment might be those who are drawn to the Black Lives movement because of a collective experience of discrimination. How resentment and *ressentiment* are different or similar is outside of the scope of this paper. However, I will use Marcel's form—*resentment*; and the definition provided by van de Ven for our discussion in this paper: "[a] core difference between envy and resentment is that the latter is caused by a perceived moral transgression while the former is not." (Niels van de Ven, Marcel Zeelenberg, and Rik Pieters, "Appraisal Patterns of Envy and Related Emotions," p.198.)

may be to try to “solve” the dilemma that Marcel says we face between admiration and resentment in the context of Levinas’s infinite I and other without resorting to *cognitively dislocated reason*. Marcel probes deeper into this dilemma and discovers clues in the idea of equality which require more explanation.

We began this exercise by wondering whether there is a connection between war, the lie, and abstraction. Marcel suggests that there is a connection, “The dialectic process is linked precisely to the fact that equality, being a category of the abstract, cannot be transferred to the realm of beings without becoming a lie and, in consequence, without giving rise to contemporary inequalities which surpass any that have been ever seen under non-democratic systems. Here too it is war which supervenes...”⁵⁶ If this is the case, do Marcel’s arguments concerning equality also apply to other abstractions concerning humans?

Abstracting Humans: Lies of Abstraction Beyond Equality

Marcel explains that equality between people is a lie of abstraction. However, this is only one lie we have discovered as a symptom of Marcel’s “disease of intelligence.” Are there other lies of abstraction to explore? If Solomon is right that passion and reason are the same, then it must be the case that the “disease of the intelligence” has its origin in the passions—but how? Unfortunately, Marcel stops there and asks others to investigate the *real* sources for the spirit of abstraction.⁵⁷

An Oblique Entry

We turn to Marcel’s differentiation between the abstract idea of equality in the form of human rights, and the human who cannot be abstracted as such. If humans cannot be equal, and “I” have the distinct impression that the other who stands before “me” is different from “me,” how, other than through abstraction, can “I” differentiate I’ness and otherness in the human? We can ask Levinas. However, we must recognize from the beginning that Levinas returns us to a disadvantaged state where we must accept the infinity of the contemplator and contemplated without ever being able to fully describe or contemplate either. How does Levinas suggest we proceed?

In “The Breach of Totality” entry in *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas asks, “But how can the same, produced as egoism, enter into relationship with an other without immediately divesting it of its alterity? What is the nature of this relationship?” In part he answers, “He and I do not form a number. The collectivity in which I say ‘you’ or ‘we’ is not a plural of the ‘I.’ I, you—these are not individuals of a common concept.”⁵⁸ There is a radical separation between the I and you so that together we do not form a singularity. We do not become “*the* human,” rather we remain as separate individuals. If we as individuals could be abstracted from the species *human* into discrete categories, then the infinite other would lose its otherness for a totality which would destroy the alterity of otherness.

⁵⁶ *MAMS*, p.120.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p.121.

⁵⁸ *TI*, p.38, p.39.

Good Before Being

Marcel offers the spirit of abstraction as a kind of “disease of the intelligence”: more specifically, as arising from the passions, but not all passions produce a “disease of intelligence.” We have discovered (as Marcel suspects) that neither disease nor intelligence encapsulate the full meaning of the spirit of abstraction. If we turn to Levinas’s notion of “good before being” we begin to see where the transposition for the passions could begin. In an interview with Tamra Wright et al., Levinas posits that, “In the *conatus essendi*, which is the effort to exist, existence is the supreme law.”⁵⁹ If being were before the good, we could *always* place our own existence before the other. Abstracting the other would not be irrational if it is aimed toward placing our own existence first. On the other hand, if the good (ethics) is placed before being (the *conatus essendi*), Levinas notes, in that same interview:

However, with the appearance of the face on the inter-personal level, the commandment “Thou shalt not kill” emerges as a limitation of the *conatus essendi*. It is not a rational limit. Consequently, interpreting it necessitates thinking it in moral terms, in ethical terms. It must be thought of outside the idea of force. It is in the human being that a rupture is produced with being’s own law, with the law of being. The law of evil is the law of being. Evil is, in this sense, very powerful. Consequently, it is the unique force. Authority is a paradox. Both authority and morality are paradoxes.⁶⁰

Placing being before the good permits one to abstract the other into categories and to assert the primacy of one category over another through the spirit of abstraction. If one places good before being, one places the other before being which produces an other-than-rational limit on the *conatus essendi*.

Levinas’s declaration of the human right, of “please don’t kill me,” does not come from the *conatus essendi*, but from the good. The otherwise than being begins in the good and becomes the locus for where the human rights discourse can begin. Understand that the discourse of the good is not a logical extension of the *conatus essendi*; rather, the other’s command of “please don’t kill me” produces a paradox of both authority (the command) and morality (the response). This reversal, placing the good before being, also disrupts the cognitive dislocation of Marcel’s resentment before admiration, and positions admiration once again before resentment. Simply, if one responds affirmatively to the cry of the other, “please don’t kill me,” the reversionary practice of the spirit of abstraction is no longer necessary because one has positioned the good before being. Once the abstraction as correlation is undone, the infinite other begins to reappear. The “other,” any other, exceeds “me” in height and while this is a form of primacy it is not an arbitrary primacy because *all* others are so ordered. This form of passivity toward the other is a welcoming which can be contrasted with the primacy of the spirit of abstraction which is a separation and segregation. This welcoming is a hospitality which is sadly missing in the spirit of abstraction which usually has its roots in resentment of the other: the deprecation of the other, not the affirmation of the other as human.

⁵⁹ Tamra Wright, Peter Hughes, and Alison Ainley, “The Paradox of Morality: An Interview with Emmanuel Levinas,” in *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other*, Robert Bernasconi, & David Wood (eds.), (New York: Routledge, 1988), p.175.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

The rupture of being, of the *conatus essendi*, does violence to the traditional notion of the primacy of being. However, Levinas is not quick to assert this violence as a disability or a disappearance. Rather this violence begins in the form of a critique which April Capili explains:

We have shown that the created human being can become critical of himself, realize his non-primacy, and reflect on his origin; he accomplishes the feat of separation as he enjoys and masters those things around him; and though he tends to become self-enclosed in the process of establishing his economy, he remains able to recognize the ethical summons of the Other.⁶¹

The rupture, the violence of the critique produces a person capable of existing in the state called radical passivity who not only can *be* but who also can, as Capili says, “recognize the ethical summons of the other.” This recognition does not mean that one can react to this summons always in a particularly helpful manner. Richard A. Cohen points out that, “Responsibilities are infinite, even if humans are insufficient for them.”⁶² The insufficient human juxtaposed against an infinite other and infinite responsibility to the other brings into question human capabilities. We cannot abstract the practical from the infinite and apply it as “*the* responsible response” because the practical is never enough. The other is both infinite and alterior, but what does alterity mean? In the same interview with Wright et al., Levinas says:

But there is something which remains outside, and that is alterity. Alterity is not at all the fact that there is a difference, that facing me there is someone who has a different nose than mine, different color eyes, another character. It is not difference, but alterity. It is alterity, the unencompassable, the transcendent. It is the beginning of transcendence. You are not transcendent by virtue of a certain different trait.⁶³

Transcendence and alterity are not something that can be abstracted as traits. Just as the transcendent nature of equality cannot be made to exist between humans, alterity, which is fundamental to ethics, cannot be abstracted because *all* people are infinitely alterior. However, if one resorts to the abstraction of traits, one removes, or at least ignores, the transcendent human which is alterior from all others: this other who begins by demanding the response to the possession of a human right: “please don’t kill me.” Abstraction applied to humans whether in the spirit of abstraction or otherwise in Levinasian terms is a cognitive disruption deserving of Marcel’s concern.

The positioning of good before being produces a reorientation of rational thinking that considers the other first. It puts the I in the mode of radical passivity or availability for service to others. My mode of rational thinking is reversed from the everyday sense of the *conatus essendi*—self-preservation. However, since I cannot ever get into the mind of the infinitely alterior other, I will always be unsure (even after conversation toward this end) of whether I am being responsible to this other. Pierre Hayat explains in the preface to Levinas’s *Alterity and Transcendence*: “Levinas wants to show that the other, by his face, attests to himself, simply,

⁶¹ April D Capili, “The Created Ego in Levinas’ Totality and Infinity,” *Sophia* 50, no. 4 (2011): p.691.

⁶² Emmanuel Levinas, *Humanism of the Other*, trans. Nidra Poller (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), p.xxxvii.

⁶³ Wright, Hughes, and Ainley, “The Paradox of Morality: An Interview with Emmanuel Levinas,” p.170.

directly, without going through any mediation.”⁶⁴ Even with this direct approach, I may not ever know what responsibility means to this other. While Levinas suggests that the pre-originary orientation of the human is the good before being, one wonders whether human beings in ordinary life do not dwell in the state of being, and it is only when the face of the other appears to “me” that “I” recognize that the good comes before being.

Levinas recognizes this difficulty. He calls the everyday state of being the *il y a* (there is). As Simon Critchley notes, “The *il y a* is Levinas’s name for the nocturnal horror of existence prior to the emergence of consciousness.”⁶⁵ It is a state of insomnia, “[a] watching when there is nothing to watch”⁶⁶—a hypervigilance of sorts for being and the *conatus essendi* that is interrupted by the face of the other.

The violence of the event of rupture of the *conatus essendi* by the appearance of the face produces a conflict for consciousness. The face of the other produces a question. According to Hayat, “[t]he I does not put itself in question; it is put in question by the other.”⁶⁷ The wrenching of the orientation from the I focused on being toward the I focused on the face of the other produces what Levinas calls a substitution, the I for the other. This substitution produces a violence to the ego which is oriented toward being and self-preservation. How does the ego cognize this violence? Levinas does not provide easy answers other than to assert the pre-originary concept of responsibility that ever-lurks like Freud’s notion of the subconscious, ever-able to assert itself at a moment’s notice.

Tamra Wright et al. ask Levinas whether his ethics is idealistic and not practical enough. Levinas responds:

That is the great separation that there is between the way the world functions concretely and the ideal of saintliness of which I am speaking. And I maintain that this ideal of saintliness is presupposed in all our value judgments.⁶⁸

With an extended answer to this question in the same interview, Levinas begins to broach the question of the third, justice, the law, and the liberal state. What is telling from this short excerpt, however, is that he recognizes that the way the world functions may be disconnected to (or at least challenged by) his pre-originary ethics. Can we say that Levinas’s location of the good before being is not the normal everyday state of affairs for the being we call human? Is our everydayness aimed toward the *conatus essendi* and self-preservation? If this is the case, even if, as Levinas explains, our value judgments are pre-disposed to the good at the level of society, we in our everydayness are likely to fall back into being unless we are confronted with intervening restraints such as laws that mitigate the efforts of the pure *conatus essendi*.

What this rupture of the ego does is place one’s being in a state of deficit. Levinas explains: “The infinite passion of responsibility, in its return upon itself goes further than its

⁶⁴ Pierre Hayat in Emmanuel Levinas, *Alterity & Transcendence*, trans. Michael B. Smith (NY: Columbia U.P., 1999), p.xiii.

⁶⁵In Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, (Cambridge U.K., Cambridge U.P, 2002), p.xxii.

⁶⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (London: Kluwer, 1978), p.5.

⁶⁷ Hayat, in Emmanuel Levinas, *Alterity & Transcendence*, p.xiii.

⁶⁸ Wright, Hughes, and Ainley, *op.cit.*, p.177. The ideal of saintliness is presupposed by Levinas in all our value judgments. Susan Wolf’s landmark essay on moral sainthood provides an interesting conversational partner with this presupposition of Levinas’s, but is beyond the scope of this study. See Susan Wolf, “Moral Saints,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 79, no. 8 (1982), pp.429–39.

identity to the hither side or beyond being and the possible, and puts the being in itself in deficit, making it susceptible of being treated as a negative quantity.”⁶⁹ The deprecation or even negation of being in the passion of responsibility is not a toward nothingness as one might suppose, but is a kind of rebirth in the form of substitution for the other. Levinas notes that, “Its recurrence is the contracting of an ego, going to the hither side of identity, gnawing away at this very identity—identity gnawing away at itself—in a remorse.”⁷⁰ The passion of responsibility; the ego putting itself into deficit—correlate both rupture and passion in close proximity. What does this moment of dissonance produce? Down these paths, Solomon’s emotions, moods, and desires are all possible choices.

This conceptual dislocation of self toward the other has implications far beyond what Levinas accords the pre-originary location of the good before being. If one is continually being wrenched from the state of the *conatus essendi* into the state of responsibility upon the appearance of the face of the other, what notion of cognitive continuity can we assign to the continual reversal of the everyday condition of existence in being? Where Levinas is taking us is toward an answer to Marcel’s spirit of abstraction as a “disease of the intelligence.” The spirit of abstraction is a defence against the Levinasian pre-originary reversal. It first categorizes the other into traits (ignoring alterity) and then asserts primacy to categories (likely similar to the categories consonant with oneself) to preserve the status quo of the ego as ascendant to maintain its *conatus essendi*. If, as Levinas accords, the *rational* deduction is toward the depreciation of the ego and the appreciation of the other, then the maintenance of the condition of the ego as ascendant after the appearance of the face of the other is wrought by another kind of deduction. This leads directly to Marcel’s assertion that the spirit of abstraction is a non-rational response to preserve the ego’s primacy...an otherwise than the acceptance of the rational orientation toward the “passion of responsibility” as a subsequent condition of the ego’s contraction. One resorts to the “continuity of being,” rather than Levinas’s “otherwise than being.”⁷¹

If we are to accept Levinas’s pre-originary orientation of the good before being then the cognitive dislocation is the reversal of this orientation, the historical state of affairs of western philosophical thought. No wonder both Levinas and Marcel see as outcomes of this historical reversal—other into the same/being before the other—as producing conditions conducive to war. The fragile ego is at the heart of where reason and passion can collide both toward the rational acceptance of responsibility or toward its ultimate rejection in the form of human abstraction which can lead to the spirit of abstraction. However, Marcel suggests that the spirit of abstraction is a shared concept, not one that necessarily originates within the I. It has its origins in the reverence for the past and the passing forward of ideas that separate abstracted humans from their humanity. Because passions and rhetoric are involved, it is not difficult to suggest that societal discourse will encourage persons to ignore, for example, that the person is human like anyone else, and embrace the abstraction that the society maintains is the “truth.” While the individual must first make the dissonant leap toward abstracting the other, the eventual designation of this other as an impersonal target is not difficult to envision.⁷²

⁶⁹ Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, p.113.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p.114.

⁷¹ The otherwise than being is a form of substitution which has profound meaning in the later works of Levinas. Included in this idea is the notion of fecundity which deserves additional discussion in the context of abstraction, a discussion that is unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper.

⁷² The Infinite other would not be infinitely other if it refers to a close relative, says Adriaan Peperzak. Therefore, the infinitely anterior other is a stranger. See Adriaan Peperzak, *Beyond the Philosophy of Emmanuel*

Levinas and Marcel will next take us on a journey that involves a “collective affirmation” of this abstraction in the form of asserting the primacy of some traits over others. We know that the spirit of abstraction and the villain of the passions—resentment—are closely linked and can come from an individual’s own experience. However, individuals alone do not cause wars, nor is the I against the singular other (who is an object of resentment) a war. There must be others who can engage the spirit of abstraction that culminates in war. The use of the term “collective affirmation” is helpful toward understanding what Levinas means by “the third” and what Marcel means by “the masses.”

The Third and the Masses

The Third

We have spent considerable time discussing Levinas’s view of the nature of the face-to-face relationship between the I and the other. According to him, I am ultimately responsible for the other. However, what happens if there are more than just you and “me”? Morgan underscores the practical dilemma that this produces when he observes that, “When I am faced with one person I am called upon to acknowledge her or not; when I am faced with two or three or more, then I am called upon to choose, to discriminate, to weigh needs, resources, and more, all the considerations that play such important roles in what we would take to be everyday normative deliberations and decision making.”⁷³ My responsibility is not abrogated by the arrival of these others; it just becomes more complex. According to Morgan, “Justice is the ramification of responsibility; it is what results when one organizes and orchestrates all involved parties.”⁷⁴ Justice therefore is not separate from responsibility but arises from responsibility and consequently ethics itself and exists alongside responsibility. In fact, Levinas says in the 1982 interview with Wyschogrod, “Justice. I call it responsibility for the other...”⁷⁵ If there were only two people in the world there would be a need for justice. The justice of the third begins in responsibility for the other.

Morgan continues, “Therefore the conditions that make justice possible, the cognitive resources and capacities, are justified in terms of their relationship to the responsibilities involved.”⁷⁶ Justice is contingent on the responsibilities that are involved but responsibility is always already there. In effect, justice is an abstraction designed to deal with the practical aspects of ethics in society where multiple players are involved. As a result, justice is never pure-responsibility in the context of the requirement that one has unlimited responsibility to the other (even though it begins in this notion of responsibility to the other). As an abstraction from this infinite, it is a negotiation of capabilities considering the situation. “The third” is the neologism that Levinas coined to address the location of justice that is present even if only you and I are on a desert island.

Levinas (Evanston, IL.: Northwestern U.P., 1997), p.201. However, we characterize the other, there is no distinction between responsibility to an unknown other or to an other who is also kin.

⁷³ Morgan, *Levinas's Ethical Politics*, p.53. Morgan is not the only one who asks this question; see also Yael Lin, *The Intersubjectivity of Time: Levinas and Infinite Responsibility* (Pittsburg: Duquesne U.P., 2013), p.134.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p.53.

⁷⁵ Wyschogrod, *Crossover Queries*, p.285.

⁷⁶ Morgan, *Levinas's Ethical Politics*, p.53.

The Masses

Marcel notes that one of the requirements for the spirit of abstraction is to make the human other invisible first so that the other can be abstracted into a category that is otherwise than human.⁷⁷ The other who has been abstracted in the spirit of abstraction enters the category of the masses, nameless, faceless, objectified by means of specific traits that turn people into objects. However, we understand from Marcel that people are not objects. We ask in frustration: “What has justice to do with the spirit of abstraction?”

Justice

Levinas maintains that I am infinitely responsible to the other who stands before me. However, a third person arrives who requires my responsibility, but this responsibility interferes with the responsibility I have to the first person. Justice and the rule of law are necessary abstractions of Levinas’s infinite responsibility that address such situations. Justice tends to “smooth” responsibility which means that the infinite of responsibility is modified to suit the needs of society. For example, the law says that only persons with handicapped stickers or plates can park in handicap spaces. A person who has just had a hip replacement has similar needs but does not have the sticker. That person must park in the last available spot in the parking lot which is far away. The responsible person might not complain that the person with the hip replacement just parked in a handicapped slot, but society will fine the person for doing so. However, justice is justice if and only if it is applied to all persons in the society and does not adversely abstract others outside of the society for treatment as being otherwise than human. In Jim Crow segregation, water fountains were segregated—white or colored. The abstraction of color is not the same as the abstraction for the handicap parking place because the abstraction of color’s only purpose is to abstract persons into arbitrary categories and permit them only those rights that the category accords. The objective of justice is not to abstract the person into categories as does Marcel’s “masses”; rather its objective is to abstract responsibilities that are relevant in the larger society.

Marcel is right to be concerned about the masses because the masses tend to abstract people into categories. Abstraction, even in the cause of justice, can be flawed as our example about the person with the hip replacement shows. However, this was not an abstraction of personhood from the person. In the case of the segregated water fountain, the person is abstracted from access to resources because of color which changes the nature of personhood based upon the accident of birth. If we first abstract persons into categories, they can be assigned human rights based upon the category to which they belong—white/colored during segregation. Rather, what Marcel asks us to do is *to begin with the notion that we are all human and from this define what human rights are accorded to all humans.*

What is informative about Marcel’s spirit of abstraction is that it, like the understanding of equality in the French Revolution, abstracts persons and objectifies them so that primacy can be assigned. The abstraction of persons into any category is the origin of the idea that can lead to the lie of the spirit of abstraction. We learned from Solomon that resentment is the villain of the passions because it poisons both the subject of the resentment and the person who resents. However, we also learned from Solomon that passions involve judgment and that passions and reason are equivalent ideas and they help to constitute our world.

⁷⁷ MAMS, p.118.

Marcel explains that through the “clearing of the ground” of abstraction, “[t]hat the human mind must retain a precise and distinct awareness of those methodological omissions which are necessary if an envisaged result is to be obtained.”⁷⁸ In other words, there is a process to abstraction. However, says Marcel, if one’s mind should yield, “[t]o a sort of fascination...” that, “[c]eases to be aware of these prior conditions that justify abstraction and deceives oneself about the nature of what is, in itself, nothing more than a method, one might almost say nothing more than an expedient.” What might be the nature of this “fascination” and why does the spirit of abstraction, as “[c]ontempt for the concrete conditions of abstract thinking...” have its origins in the passions?⁷⁹

What is informative about Marcel’s suggestion that the spirit of abstraction has its origin in the passions is that it is associated with the villain of the passions. The spirit of abstraction that generates arbitrary primacy between persons is not just a disease of the intelligence but *cognitively dislocated reason*. Resentment in and of itself is a passion and a product of reason. However, with the idea of cognitive dislocation, one must first wrongly separate and segregate persons into categories (masses) and thus objectify them when persons are ultimately alterior and subjective and cannot be equated with each other like objects can. It is this dislocation that begins the chain of causes that can lead to the spirit of abstraction. What follows the abstraction is the passion of resentment that begins in a false premise, making the argument moot even if the logic of the resentment is reasonably thought through. Passions are not the problem; the arbitrary primacy of the spirit of abstraction is the locus of the lie of abstraction that through *cognitively dislocated reason* forges an avenue toward dehumanization, war, ethnic cleansing, and other human atrocities.⁸⁰

Looking Forward

This has been a limited review of the subject of the spirit of abstraction. The effort has been to bring Levinas and Marcel into dialogue on the subject. There is much more to the third and justice, and Levinas’s otherwise than being in the context of his theories of the *saying* and the *said*, that has not been discussed but are worthy of a fuller study. Also, Paul Ricoeur’s thoughts differ from Levinas on responsibility and the other, and these deserve additional attention in the context of the spirit of abstraction. Solomon found no distinction between reason and passion, but with him I maintain that if we understand the meaning of passion, we can learn from it. This learning is not always toward the good. Marcel explains that reason can be controverted in such a way that persons can be abstracted into categories. Envy, resentment, and admiration can be controverted to fit what has been abstracted and foment such atrocities as the

⁷⁸ *MAMS*, p.115.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.115-16.

⁸⁰ How this *cognitively dislocated reason* devolves into war deserves significantly more attention. Marcel gives us additional clues: “The more we grasp the notion of experience in its proper complexity, in its active and I would even dare to say in its dialectical aspects, the better we shall understand how experience cannot fail to transform itself into reflection, and we shall even have the right to say that the more richly it is experience, the more, also, it is reflection.” (*The Mystery of Being, (Vol. I): Reflection and Mystery*, trans. G. S. Fraser {Chicago: Regnery, 1950}, p.83.) A question that deserves further consideration is: Can we say that the spirit of abstraction both simplifies the other, but also serves to amplify rhetoric that inflames the passions while it serves also to dilute the experience by preventing the abstracting person from encountering the other in his or her fullness/personal reality? If this is so, what methods can be used to counteract the simplification, amplification, and dilution that the spirit of abstraction engenders?

Holocaust and segregation. Levinas says that the other is infinitely different from me and I owe the other infinite responsibility. While this and all other persons are different from me, we are still all human. Society and justice have a way of altering or “smoothing” this responsibility which means, as with the case of the person with the hip replacement, one may not always provide infinite responsibility to the other.

However, I believe that both Marcel and Levinas are headed toward a notion of justice that accords personhood before any other consideration and that thinking about human rights ought to begin with the perspective that they be accorded to all persons. If, as Solomon suggests, there is no distinction between reason and passion, it is when passion is directed toward abstracting others from their humanity, that the spirit of abstraction is engaged. What both Marcel and Levinas are asking is that we recognize the signs of such abstraction and engage in the discourse to return the other to the status of the human that the other deserves.