

Authors' penultimate draft, please cite the published version in: *Levinas and Analytic Philosophy*, M. Fagenblat ed. (forthcoming) London: Routledge

## **Commanding, Giving, Vulnerable: What is the Normative Standing of the Other in Levinas?**

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### **Introduction**

As everyone knows, at the heart of Levinas's work is the apparently simple idea that through the encounter with another person, we are forced to give up our self-concern and take heed of the ethical relation between us. But, while simple on the surface, when one tries to characterise it in more detail, it can be hard to fit together the various ways in which Levinas talks about this relation, and to identify precisely what he took its normative structure to be; for, this is described in a number of apparently different ways, that are not obviously compatible or equivalent, such as 'command', 'call', 'summons', 'demand' and so on. In this paper, we intend to focus on these different characterisations, and show what makes them different, while also endeavouring to find a way in which Levinas's conception may nonetheless be fitted together into a coherent account of the face-to-face encounter which is at the heart of his ethics. To keep this discussion in reasonable bounds, we will mainly focus on *Totality and Infinity* (hereafter *TI*).<sup>1</sup> We will begin by considering the different normative terms used to characterise the encounter in that text, and show how they are conceptually distinct from one another; we will then offer a way to read Levinas's position to nonetheless show how these different normative relations can be fitted together into a stable position.

As an illustration of the variety of normative transactions that Levinas mentions in connection with the encounter between subject and other, consider the following passage:

Let us for the moment attend to the sense which the abstractness or nudity of a face breaks into this order of the world involves, and the overwhelming of consciousness which corresponds to this ‘abstractness’. Stripped of its very form, a face is paralyzed in its nudity. It is a *distress*. The nudity of a face is a denuding, and already a *supplication* in the straightforwardness that aims at me. But this supplication is an exigency; in it humility is joined with *height*. The ethical dimension of visitation is thereby indicated. A true representation remains a possibility of appearance; the world which strikes against thought can do nothing against free thought – which is able to refuse inwardly, to take refuge in itself, to remain precisely a free thought before the true, to return to itself, to reflect on itself and take itself to be the origin of what it receives, to master what precedes it through memory. While free thought thus remains the Same, a face imposes itself upon me without my being able to be deaf to its *call* or to forget it, that is, without my being able to stop *holding myself responsible* for its distress. Consciousness loses its first place.

The presence of a face thus signifies an irrecusable *order*, a *command*, which puts a stop to the availability of consciousness. Consciousness is *called into question* by a face...

But the calling into question of this wild and naïve freedom for itself, sure of its refuge in itself, is not reducible to a negative movement. The calling into question of oneself is in fact the *welcome* of the absolutely other. The *epiphany* of the absolute other is a face, in which the other calls on me and signifies an order to me through his nudity, his denuding. His presence is a *summons* to answer. The I does not only become aware of this necessity to answer, as though it were an obligation or a duty about which it would have to come to a decision; it is in its very position wholly a responsibility or a diacony, as it is put in Isaiah, chapter 53.<sup>2</sup>

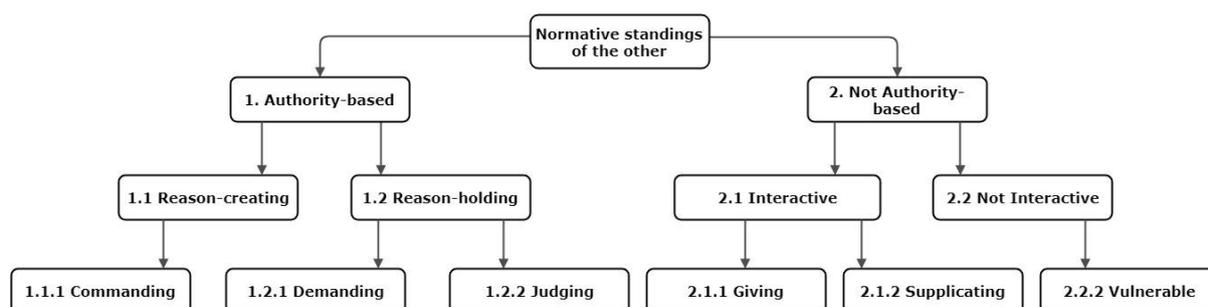
From this passage – taken not from *TI* but from an essay first published three years later, in 1964, ‘Meaning and Sense’ – we have italicised a handful of terms which each characterise something of the normative dynamics at play between self and other. Those mentioned here include: distress, supplication, height, order, command, call, calling into question, welcome, epiphany, and summons. Our starting point is to note that *prima facie*, there is some tension between these different

characterisations, and that there is a good deal of ambiguity about what Levinas might mean by several if not every one of these concepts. As a result, anyone reading Levinas is confronted with an interpretative challenge. Does the other present the subject with ethical obligations by issuing a command, or by making a plea? Is it the other's height that is revealed as an epiphany to the subject, or rather their vulnerability? In fact, the list of ways of characterising the normative relation that are exhibited in this passage does not yet complete the full range of such relations that can be discerned in *TI*. Two others that we will consider as important options to be delineated are the notions of *teaching*, and of *giving*.

What we propose to do is to offer a schematic way of distinguishing between this variety of concepts that Levinas deploys. The hope is not only to show how each is different from the others, but also to animate the relevance of each to Levinas' understanding of the self-other encounter. Before concluding, we will offer some criteria for adjudicating how the various concepts so distinguished might make sense of Levinas' ethical outlook.

### The dimension of height

First, then, here is a chart that maps a selection of Levinas' normative concepts.



The remainder of the next two sections of the present essay will be devoted to explaining Levinas' normative concepts in accordance with this schema.

The broadest and most fundamental distinction that we propose as a helpful one to separate some of these concepts is that between the other standing as authoritative over the subject, versus the other standing before the subject without authority. This is charted as the division between 1 and 2 on our map. Generally speaking, Levinas uses the term 'height' to denote the other's authority that the subject

is struck with in the encounter. As such, the left-hand side of our chart represents the manifestations of the other's 'dimension of height'.

Having said that, it is worth noting that the concept of height is itself a rather complex one in Levinas' vocabulary. When it first appears in *TI* (p. 35), the metaphor of the 'dimension of height' seems to represent an *epistemic* relation between the subject and the ungraspable alterity of the other. There, the sense in which the other is 'Most High' (*ibid*) is that they stand beyond the realm of what the subject can fathom, which is an epistemic relation akin to that between a subject and some high up object, perhaps dazzlingly close to the sun, too far off to be seen, towards which the subject can only crane their neck and squint. This epistemic sense of the metaphor of height contrasts with another sense that Levinas gives to the same term – the sense of *practical authority*. Here, the other is 'high' because to look up to them is for the subject to stand in some normative relation of authority over them. As a metaphor for practical authority, the notion of height captures the subordination of the subject to the other who issues commands, and who is entitled to hold the subject to account and to cast judgement. This is what Levinas has in mind when he invokes the concept of height in the quoted passage above, as a consequence of the 'exigency' – that is, the demandingness – of the other's supplication. So to be clear, the left-hand side of the chart represents the other's dimension of height, but only in this practical sense. The epistemic sense of height is also relevant to the other's normative standing, but in connection with the right-hand side of the chart, to which we will return later.

Focusing on the left-hand side for now: part of what Levinas thinks is characteristic of the encounter between the subject and the other is that the subject is struck by the other's height qua practical authority. In keeping with Levinas' methodology – which involves offering a phenomenological description of the experience of interpersonal interaction at the same time as making normative claims about the nature of interpersonal relations<sup>3</sup> – this impression of the other's authority is supposed to ring true to experience at the same time as revealing an important component of interpersonal ethics. In this case, that component is that just as one can be impressed by a stranger's authority to cast judgement, or to make demands, so the other does in fact stand in this relation of authority. On Levinas' view, the height

that the other appears to have is not merely an appearance, but an enduring feature of the normative landscape.

What complicates matters, though, is that there are a number of contrasting ways that this authority might be cashed out, and it is not obvious that they are all compatible with one another. A basic distinction between two species of authority is that between what one might call reason-creating authority, and reason-holding authority.<sup>4</sup> The former kind of authority is just the power to intentionally create obligatory reasons for another person.<sup>5</sup> This is the authority that a parent might typically have to instruct their child to, say, go to their room; or that which a sergeant might have to order soldiers into combat; or that which an employer typically takes themselves to have to direct their employees' work. It is in this spirit, apparently, that Levinas says in the quoted passage that the face of the other 'signifies an irrecusable order, a command' (see also *TI*, pp. 201, 214). Naturally, the content of the command is not meant to be anything so trivial as the orders of the parent, sergeant or employer. If the face of the other commands, then it commands the subject to heed the other's interests, their needs, and to act morally with these considerations in mind. And if the other is understood as possessing this kind of authority, and as deploying this authority by issuing ethical commands in the heat of the interpersonal encounter, then it follows that the moral obligations that are commanded did not bind the subject prior to the encounter - because to command is to create a new obligation.

This interpretation of Levinas – as positing a power in the other to bring new moral obligations into existence – requires some further qualification. Specifically, even if it is right to read Levinas as meaning something subtly different by the term 'command' than what he means by the term 'demand', he clearly does not mean 'command' in exactly its ordinary sense. Commands, in the ordinary sense, are intentional acts. Indeed, this is crucial to their normative structure. But the idea that the *face* of the other – not the other themselves – issues a command to the subject, suggests that Levinas does not have quite such an intentional transaction in mind. To encounter the face of the other is to experience their alterity. To speak of this alterity as making a command is evidently a somewhat metaphorical expression, since the face is not the kind of thing that entertains intentions. But even supposing that the notion of command is understood somewhat metaphorically, there remains the possibility that Levinas may

indeed be suggesting that ethical obligations are *created* in the moment of the encounter by virtue of the authority that the other has over the subject.

Such a possibility contrasts quite sharply with the construal of the other's authority as reason-holding. Reason-holding authority is just the entitlement to hold another person to account for some obligation which they face independently of this particular exercise of authority. Accordingly, one might think that if there is a legitimate role for the police then it is to hold citizens to the law, where the reason any given citizen has to obey the law is – putatively – separate from the fact that the police will enforce it. Similarly, the referee in a boxing bout has this kind of practical authority: to hold fighters accountable to the rules of the sport, which they ought to treat as obligations; but not to create new obligations, or to change the rules.

It is in this spirit, we suggest, that Levinas describes the other as having the practical authority to call the subject into question, to make demands of the subject, and to judge the subject. In these components of his account of the encounter, the subject finds themselves confronted with a shocking force, one that holds the subject to a set of standards – moral standards – that hitherto had not so much as occurred to them. It is in being held to account, all of a sudden, that the subject is torn out of their naïve, self-interested practical perspective (*TI*, pp. 43, 76, 85, 88-9). The characterisation of the normative standing of the other as involving reason-*creating* authority implied a picture of moral reasons as being the sort of thing that can be brought into existence by the actions of agents (or at least by the face of the other). In contrast, if the other's normative standing is just one of reason-*holding*, then this implies a different picture of the nature of moral reasons: a picture in which the system of moral reasons exists independently of any agent's actions. This difference can be understood as one in the direction of the relation of dependence between moral reasons and the other's authority. If the other has reason-creating authority, then the normative force of moral reasons to heed the other's interest depends on this authority. On the other hand, if the other instead has reason-holding authority, then this authority consists in the entitlement to insist that the subject heeds such moral reasons and so the authority is partly dependent for its force on the prior normative force of those moral reasons themselves. As such, it is compatible with the other having reason-creating authority that they may also have reason-holding authority

(though not entailed by it: legislators are not automatically police officers). And yet the notion of reason-holding authority provides the resources to make sense of the other's practical authority – their dimension of height – even if one wanted to avoid interpreting Levinas as attributing to the other the power to create new moral reasons.<sup>6</sup>

Hopefully this clarifies the difference between the idea that the face of the other commands, and the idea that it merely (but authoritatively) states the moral reasons that confront the subject. What has not yet been clarified, though, is what difference there might be between the various expressions that Levinas uses to invoke the other's reason-holding authority: that is, between the other as demanding, as judging, and as calling into question. Such differences, if there are any, are faint. But one might nonetheless want to parse apart the notion of the other as a mere agent of the moral law – i.e. as a demander – from the notion of a judge who has a particular privileged status to scrutinise the subject's conduct, past and present. Whereas encountering a force that will hold one to account for one's immediate duties may induce a certain kind of transformation in the subject, this might not be quite as far-reaching as the transformation brought about by an encounter with the more holistically penetrating eyes of a judge.

Indeed, this appears to be a difference to which Levinas was sensitive in *TI*. All of the normative concepts that might be grouped below 1.2 in our chart are instances of what Levinas calls 'the summons'. Or, to be more precise, there may be two senses of summons at play in *TI* – a legalistic sense and a common parlance sense – and the entries under the 1.2 branch of our chart exemplify the legalistic sense of the summons. That is to say, if the other is taken to have a standing of reason-holding authority, then part of the fallout of the subject's encounter with the other is that the subject is summonsed to give an account of themselves. The common parlance sense of 'summons' which contrasts with this, is that rather than being summonsed – as to appear in court – the subject has simply been summoned – as in beckoned or called – to take their place in the public domain of responsible action and intersubjective deliberation. Certainly Levinas does think that one consequence of the encounter is that the subject is summoned in the common parlance sense – that the subject is summoned to responsibility is one way of expressing the transcendental significance the encounter has for the subject. But it is quite ambiguous

which kind of transaction (or combination of transactions) on the bottom tier of our chart give rise to this summoning, in Levinas' view. By contrast, as stated, the legalistic summoning is a product of the other's reason-holding authority, and this warrants a moment's further exploration.

The encounter with an other who demands may be sufficient to explain the dawn of the subject's sense of responsibility. Just recognising the authority of the other to make these demands – which recognition is, as Levinas emphasises, inescapable in the encounter – entails recognising the legitimacy of the obligations, adherence to which is being demanded. And once the subject is committed to a system of obligations constraining what they may legitimately do, they are landed, irrevocably, with a self-conception as a responsible agent. So simply by demanding, the other summonses the subject to regard themselves as responsible which means being prepared to give an account, a justification, of their actions.<sup>7</sup>

However, the encounter with an other who judges presents a summons that goes further. As Levinas says in *TI* (p. 244), 'Judgment is pronounced upon me in the measure that it summons me to respond', and, consequently (p. 245), this 'call to infinite responsibility confirms the subjectivity in its apologetic position'. The 'apologetic position' at issue is a stance the subject takes of taking responsibility not just for their immediate conduct with regard to the interest of the particular other before them, but for their whole life. The summons of the judge is a holistic summons to regard one's every deed as such that it must be accounted for – or for which one must give an apology. Thus, both the demander and the judge are standings that might 'call into question' the subject's conduct, and thereby summons the subject to account for themselves. Insofar as there is a difference between them, it is one of degree, where the former can be understood as calling the other to account in the particular scenario of the encounter, and the latter as calling the other to give an exhaustive – impossibly extensive – apology for all of their life. As such, in a sense, the other as judge entails the other as demander, but the entailment does not run the other way around. To be sure, the role of the other as demander is not redundant in this picture, because it lends Levinas' theory the resources to give a modest explanation of the accountability relation that is instantiated in the face, without hanging this explanation on his further and quite distinct ambitions to explain the formation of the subject's self-conception as scrutinised by a judge to whom they owe an

apologia of their life. It is important to keep these explanations to some degree separate because one may well be more plausible than the other, and they may rest on quite different foundations.

This completes our attempt to delineate and explain the notions of the other as commanding, demanding, and judging, which together comprise the other's dimension of height (in the practical rather than the epistemic sense). As suggested above, with regards to each of these standings, Levinas' claims are two-fold: that the other appears to the subject in the encounter as though they have such a normative status, and that they actually do. However such phenomenological and normative claims are to be appraised, we have shown how these characterisations are sufficiently conceptually distinct that they can stand or fall independently. The task now will be to similarly demarcate the non-authoritative normative standings that Levinas variously attributes to the other.

### **The dimension of depth**

In the long passage quoted earlier, the face of the other was described as a distress and a supplication. Other similarly non-authoritative statuses are invoked in *TI* including the other as 'destitute' (pp. 75, 215), as making an 'appeal' (pp. 181, 194), as a 'nudity' that appears as an 'always positive value' (p. 75). And a particularly well-known line draws some further, similar comparisons with the needy, vulnerable and lowly (*TI*, p. 215): 'The Other who dominates me in his transcendence is thus the stranger, the widow, and the orphan, to whom I am obligated.' Quite explicitly, then, Levinas means to contrast the dimension of height with an alternative, indeed opposite side of the face; let's call it the dimension of depth. Noticeably, then, the dimension of depth, like that of height, is multifaceted.

A first strand of this dimension to be picked out is the other's standing as a giver,<sup>8</sup> to whom the subject is indebted. Whilst the debt that arises might be associated with a power more akin to practical authority, the giving in the first instance is not. There are points in *TI* and elsewhere at which Levinas implies that the generosity with which the subject must respond to the other is called for by the openness that the other first presents to the subject.<sup>9</sup> By doing so, the other treats the subject as a responsible being and thereby hauls them into the stage of their mature, morally responsible agency (and enables their escape from what Levinas calls the *il y a*). (Here, then, is another possible way to explain how the other

summons the subject in the common parlance rather than legalistic sense.) What the other gives is their directed attention, and the benefit this brings to the subject is immeasurable. Consequently, one might think that, on the basis of this transformative gift, the subject owes it to the other to recognise them in like fashion. Such recognition involves acknowledging the other's moral significance and seeing their needs and interests as opportunities to give something in return. As such, the other's standing as a giver generates a host of reasons for the subject to act in the other's interest, but without positing any authority in the other to command or demand adherence to such reasons.

As a non-authoritative source of altruistic practical reasons for the subject, the other's standing as giving (2.1.1 in our schema) is akin to the other's standing as supplicating (2.1.2). Like that of giving, the standing of supplicating creates reasons for the subject to heed the other's interest – reasons that in both instances are created by virtue of the interaction between subject and other. But whereas the standpoint of giving generated a debt from the other's own transformative gift to the subject – the gift of the attention that enables the maturation of the subject's responsible agency – the standpoint of supplication, by contrast, involves no such giving. This is clearly a quite separate normative relation that forms a part of Levinas' description of the encounter. The thought is that when recognising the face, the subject cannot help but see the other's expression as communicating a call for help. The content of the communication may be described in a number of ways: most commonly by Levinas as a supplication, an appeal, or an imploring; but it seems that he could just as well also use terms such as a request, a plea, or an entreaty. Whatever subtle connotative differences there might be within this clutch of normative concepts, they plausibly share the same basic structure, which is one of creating a reason that did not exist prior to the communicative act, and where the reason created is grounded not in the practical authority of the other to create it, but in some combination of the other's need, and the subject's own volition. If the other supplicates, then, by virtue of their communicative interaction with the subject in the encounter, they create a reason for the latter from, as we are calling it, a position of depth.

A qualifier is required here that mirrors the one made earlier regarding the idea of the face making a command. The ordinary concept of requesting (where that is a representative of this whole class of normative transactions grouped at 2.1.2) is an intentional kind of reason-giving. Indeed, as was true of

commands, the reasons successful requests create is partly grounded in the requester's intention to create a reason for the requestee and the latter's recognition of this very intention as reason-creating.<sup>10</sup> But, again, the face is not the kind of thing that entertains intentions, and so Levinas' use of such concepts as request, or supplication, are somewhat metaphorical. To be sure: the point is not that one cannot communicate requests (or commands for that matter) using one's facial expressions alone; surely one can. But Levinas' phenomenology is supposed to be a general one about the nature and normative dynamics of interpersonal encounters as such. Thus, the normative standing that Levinas attributes to the face should not be a standing that is only occupied on those occasions when the other actually intends to appeal to the subject for help, and makes this appeal through their facial expression. Neither should the standing of commanding be thought of as occupied only when the other intends to express a particular command by their facial expression. Indeed, since Levinas thinks that these dimensions of height and of depth are presented together in the face of the other, it is hard to see how either of them could be meant as actually intended commands or requests. How could a face communicate a specific command and a specific supplication at the same time? And yet, as before, there remains a metaphorical sense in which Levinas may well think that the other makes a request: they may occupy a status in relation to the subject in the encounter which is such that the very presentation of the face non-authoritatively creates a reason for the subject to heed the other's interest, where that reason depends on that communicative interaction.

We have mentioned that the reason created by the supplication of the other may be partly grounded in the other's need. This is true, but supplications (and requests etc.) are not *just* statements of neediness. Above and beyond this, they are transactional attempts to create reasons. The final category in our schema of normative standings that Levinas attributes to the other is the presentation of the other's neediness precisely without that further transactional dimension. This component of the phenomenon of the encounter enjoys a special emphasis at various crucial points of *TI*, such as the famous line quoted above which likens the other to a stranger, a widow or an orphan. Independently of any requests or appeals, the very fact that the other is vulnerable and needy, is revealed to the subject in the encounter, along with the concomitant *normative* fact that this vulnerability and neediness matters. On this line of

thought, the subject is confronted with the fact of a source of (non-instrumental) value wholly outside of their own life and ends, and it is the acknowledgement of this exterior value that straightforwardly gives rise to the altruistic reasons that had previously been absent from the subject's ego-centric practical outlook.

Some care is required here in marking the difference between the normative standings of supplication (2.1.2) and vulnerability (2.2.2). We have said that the former creates a reason only by virtue of some communicative transaction between subject and other, whereas the latter does not require such a transaction. This is correct in the sense that the communication of the supplication is intrinsic to the normativity of the supplication, whereas the fact that the other is vulnerable and needy would give rise to normative reasons for the subject (in an externalist sense),<sup>11</sup> even if this vulnerability were not revealed to the subject. But having said this, it should be noted that there is also a communicative aspect to the revelation of the other's vulnerability in the face. Levinas does not describe the subject as hitting upon this remarkable fact of the other's value of their own accord, under the subject's own initiative. Rather, the fact of the other's destitution (for that is synonymous in this vocabulary with vulnerability, need, and with one of Levinas' senses of the term 'nudity') is *taught* to the subject by the other. The realisation of the other's moral worth and need is an 'epiphany' that the other plays an active role in delivering.<sup>12</sup>

One way of understanding the distinctive normative move captured in 2.2.2, is therefore as an epistemic transaction between the other and the subject, in which the other teaches the subject of their (the other's) very own moral worth, their vulnerability, and their neediness. In this regard, Levinas speaks of 'the coinciding of the revealer and the revealed in the face, which is accomplished in being situated in height with respect to us – in teaching' (*TI*, p. 67). So here at the end of our survey of concepts we return to a notion of height, not in the practical sense associated with the left-hand side of the chart, but in an epistemic sense. The other has the height of a teacher, of one with a lesson to disclose. Terms with an epistemic ring to them – disclosure, revelation, teaching, epiphany, conversation – occur frequently in *TI* (pp. 28, 51, 62, 89, 171, 204). It seems to us that the significance that Levinas puts on this epistemic aspect of the encounter can only make sense if that which is being conveyed epistemically is some

normative fact, or some conjunction of normative facts that form the basis of a whole practical outlook. Specifically, what the other teaches, what is revealed and disclosed to the subject in their epiphany is a (set of) normative fact(s) about the other: that they matter, and not in a way that is instrumental to any of the subject's own ends. No other kind of fact could adequately fill the important role that Levinas has carved out for the learning that goes on in the encounter.

The final task that remains in the explanation of our schema is to discuss the in/compatibility and dependency of the possible ways of explaining the others' normative standing within the dimension of depth. In the next section we will turn to some general reflections on the compatibility and dependency of the dimensions of height and depth in Levinas' ethics, in light of our schematic clarifications.

Strikingly, the notion of the other as giving is starkly independent of any of the other normative standings that we have discussed. Suppose for a moment that the transcendental gift that the other gives could be sufficient to generate the entire plethora of altruistic moral reasons as a debt that the subject owes the other. If this much is granted, then the normative force of the other's gift does not require that the subject sees the other as either high and authoritative, or low and needy. Such statuses are irrelevant to the normative power that might be created simply by the other's gift: their generosity does all the work. Furthermore, just as the other as giving does not require any other normative standing in order to make sense, neither does it entail or preclude any other.<sup>13</sup> That is, just because it was the other whose generously given recognition made the subject into the morally mature responsible agent that they are, it does not follow that the subject must therefore see the other as having the standing to demand that the other pay their debt. It could be that only God, or only the subject's conscience, or only the state, have the practical authority to hold the other to account to repay the debt of the other's gift; the mere fact of being the giver does not necessarily endow the other with such practical authority. And, similarly, if the subject is indebted to the other and must (seek to) repay this debt by heeding the other's interest this does not require the subject to see the other's interest as mattering *intrinsically*, in the sense that we have suggested comprises the 'vulnerability' option in the schema (2.2.2). Rather, it would be sufficient for the subject's response to the gift that they recognised the other's life as mattering – even if from the subject's point of view the other's life only mattered only because it both gave rise to the subject's own

agential capacities, and constituted interests and needs that the subject can assist as a normatively fitting response to their debt. To value *X only because it benefits Y*, is to value *X* instrumentally, so the other's standing as giving does not require the subject to value the other's life and ends non-instrumentally.

The rational relations between supplication (2.1.2) and vulnerability (2.2.2) are more complex. On the face of it, it seems that the normative force of the other's supplication is straightforwardly dependent on the recognition of the intrinsic worth of the other's life and their neediness, i.e. on their vulnerability. This raises the question of whether the other's standing as supplicating is redundant – that is, whether it adds anything to the normative relations between subject and other that are already established by the subject's recognition of the other's vulnerability. This question amounts to asking what significance there might be to the very *asking* that the other communicates through their face. This is a murky issue. There are grounds for going either way: to think either that the asking for help adds nothing, is normatively inert; or, that it is a crucial feature of the ethical relation. Let us briefly animate both sides.

On the one hand there is the view that once the subject is committed to the non-instrumental value of the other's life and ends, and also to the fact that the other is in need in ways that the subject has the power to alleviate, nothing further is required to generate – from the subject's own perspective – strong reasons to act in the other's interest. Indeed, in a *pro tanto* sense, the reasons such commitments generate could be infinite, as Levinas says they are. They could be infinite in the sense that once one is committed to the value of another's life, there are an indefinite number of ways that the flourishing of their life, and the alleviation of danger and suffering from it, could be enhanced by the subject's actions. Even if one were to wholly devote oneself to a particular other at the expense of every other practical motivation, one could only do so much to help them: more would remain to be done. And since one can never be sure that one has reached the limits of one's capacities – either in the intensity of one's effort, or the efficiency of one's expenditure of that effort – one can never rule out the possibility that one has not only failed to do all that needs to be done, but that one has also failed to do all that one can do, or could have done, to aid the other. This line of thought is further augmented with a view of requests (and supplications, pleas etc.) according to which agents have the power to create new reasons for one another to do things by making requests, only with regard to a certain set of actions. Namely, requests

can only be efficacious in creating new reasons if the action being asked for is not already an obligation of the requestee's and known to be one by both parties. This view maintains – quite plausibly – that if an action is already mandatory for an agent, then there is no way that further *pro tanto* reasons in favour of the action could affect the balance of reasons for or against doing it. Such is the nature of mandatory reasons (says that view).

On the other hand, though, is a view that stresses the *relational* quality that the other's vulnerability takes on in the ethical relation between subject and other in the encounter. This view points out that in the encounter, the subject does not see the other as needy and therefore as the source of reasons for anyone at all to help them out, and only by extension, therefore, as the source of reasons for the subject in particular. The encounter with the face does not involve the extrapolation of the subject's particular obligations towards the other from the recognition of general, agent-neutral moral reasons that would apply to anyone. Rather, the experience of seeing the other is one of finding oneself locked in a special relationship with the other, where one's reasons to act in the other's interest have the directed, personal flavour of what Michael Thompson calls 'bipolar obligations'.<sup>14</sup> Thus, on this view, the role of the other's supplication is crucial to the resulting normative landscape. The supplication by the other to the subject transforms the other's vulnerability from a general source of agent-neutral reasons for anybody into a specific source of reasons for the other in particular. Rather than just having a reason to help the other because that would be a good thing, the supplication gives the subject a reason to help the other for the other's sake, where the other, in supplicating, has put themselves in the hands of the subject. The supplication turns the other's vulnerability into the subject's problem.

This defence of the relevance of supplication may seem convincing, but from our point of view the tension between the two lines of thought just presented remains an undecided issue. After all, the bipolar, directed quality of the reasons stemming from the other's vulnerability might just as well be explained by the fact that the other *teaches* (or reveals or discloses) this vulnerability to the subject. Such an epistemic relation of teacher and student might be sufficient in this regard, in which case, again, the notion of supplication would seem superfluous to the entire affair. Having presented this corner of the dialectic, it will suffice to leave the final answer open for present purposes. And with that, we conclude

our schematic survey of the normative standings that Levinas variously attributes to the other in the encounter. What remains is to offer some framework for judging how far these concepts can all be fitted together, and where this piecing together must conform to some other constraints of Levinas' ethical worldview that have so far eluded our discussion.

### **Putting things together**

Here are two criteria that should plausibly be met by any account that calls itself a Levinasian ethics. First, it should in some way redeem Levinas' promise in the first sentence of the preface to *TI* (p. 21): it should show that we are not 'duped by morality'. This means offering some explanation of the grounds of a moral world-view that could form the basis of a defence against at least some form of moral scepticism.<sup>15</sup> Second, the resulting moral world-view should explain the moral significance of the other's otherness; that is, their ungraspable infinity, or as it is otherwise described, their alterity. In short, a Levinasian ethics might be thought of as one which shows that moral reasons are not mere appearances, they are real; and that those moral reasons exist for the subject *because of* the infinity of the other.<sup>16</sup>

What these criteria helpfully illuminate, is how the dimensions of height and depth might be related in Levinas' broader outlook. Or at least, they help to get clear on why Levinas' view includes both of these dimensions.<sup>17</sup> The criteria help in this way because it seems, at least at first blush, that each dimension can contribute to the fulfilment of only one criterion. The dimension of height might offer a successful place to explain the ethical significance of the infinity of the other, but by itself it cannot hope to give a satisfactory defence of morality against *any* form of scepticism (let alone the specific kind of debunking scepticism that we think is the relevant concern). On the other hand, the dimension of depth can be seen to provide some resources to defend morality from this debunking species of moral scepticism, but it has a fundamental problem in incorporating any sense of the other's infinity.

Up to this point, the goal of this paper has been not to commit to any particular reading of Levinas but to show what kinds of interpretation are possible and what some of the consequences of those interpretations might be. In claiming now that the dimension of height can make sense of the other's

infinity, but not of morality's credibility, and in also claiming precisely the reverse about the dimension of depth, we are departing from our impartial methodology. In the remaining paragraphs we will give some backup to these claims. To be clear, though, our interest is not so much in defending this particular interpretation of Levinas (though we do support it), but in showing, by example, that it would be possible to fit some of the concepts that we have delineated above together into a coherent Levinasian ethical picture.

First, then, let us elaborate on the sense in which the dimension of height can incorporate the infinity of the other into the ethical picture. Above, we showed the boundaries between different species of practical reasons and gestured towards some of the implications of notions of practical authority for the metaphysical status of moral obligations. What we did not do was discuss what might *ground* the other's practical authority, if the other is indeed entitled to make commands, or demands, or judgements over the subject. Levinas' answer to this question is that the other's authority is self-evidently grounded in their height over the subject, which is an aspect of the other that the subject cannot possibly deny while in the grip of the face-to-face encounter.<sup>18</sup> At this point in his account, therefore, the practical and the epistemic senses of the dimension of height become intimately entwined. It is *because* the other strikes the subject as ungraspable and endowed with this epistemic height that they are felt also to have the practical height, the authority to judge the subject, hold them to account and perhaps make moral commands. In this manner, the dimension of height makes some practical sense of the other's infinity.

This does not get Levinas any further, however, in answering morality's critics. For as long as the authority to generate reasons and responsibility is based solely in what the encounter feels like for the subject, the possibility that the subject is being duped by morality will remain a live concern. And in Levinas' writings there is no other ground for this practical authority than its mere overriding obviousness in the stern face of the other. So this dimension alone is feeble in the face of any brand of moral scepticism that is of concern to Levinas.

By contrast, the dimension of depth does offer one particular resource to contribute to an answer to this particular kind of moral sceptic. If the subject's moral worldview is understood in a moral realist fashion as built upon knowledge of some fundamental moral facts, then a relevant line of sceptical resistance is

that which doubts whether the beliefs the subject forms about putatively fundamental moral facts could ever be well-founded. To be clear, this is a challenge from moral epistemology, rather than the kind of moral scepticism that for some other reason denies the existence of moral facts. That is, rather than denying that moral facts exist, the sceptic in question denies that anyone would be able to form justified true beliefs about them, even if they do exist. For instance, one might worry that rather than being appraisals of moral truths, our moral beliefs are products of our inclinations (cf. Hume) or our societal framework (cf. Nietzsche). In response to this, in the mood of his dimension of depth, Levinas offers a story of how such beliefs are formed in a way that avoids this moral-epistemological challenge. The fundamental moral belief in question is that there is a source of value outside of the subject's own life and ends, namely the life and ends of the other. The salient features of the sceptical challenge for our purposes are twofold. First, there is the threat that one cannot rule out that one's axiological convictions are formed, not by a reliable cognition of moral facts out in the world, but rather by influence from one's inclinations or one's social environment, by interpellation into the ideology of one's society.<sup>19</sup> Second, there is the worry that such moral beliefs never have the correct proper object. That is, moral beliefs are never formed when the subject has in mind the value itself that the belief is purportedly about, but always rather with some material object, or other inappropriate proper object in mind. But the parts of Levinas' account of the encounter grouped under the dimension of depth (specifically 2.1.2 and 2.2.2) resist this challenge. They do so by showing one way that moral beliefs can be formed in a shock, indeed an epiphany, which because of its very surprisingness seems on the face of it not to be a belief caused by one's inclinations or social influences. Rather, the belief formed as a result of the teaching of the other looks at least *prima facie* to be caused by a sudden attunement to exactly the proper object of such a belief, namely the other's moral worth, which is disclosed in their vulnerability.

This may well be a fruitful application of Levinas' theory. A problem, though, is that the other's otherness cannot figure in the moral cognition of being struck by the other's supplicating vulnerability. This is because if the encounter is understood as – most importantly – an episode of a special kind of cognition, then the object of that cognition must of course be the sort of thing that is not only in principle fathomable to the subject, but indeed something that is in fact fathomed by them. Thus, the other's

infinity, which is unfathomable *ex hypothesi*, cannot be a part of the subject's thoughts that plays a role explaining the ensuing well-founded foundational moral convictions – and so instead comes to figure on the other side of the equation, under the dimension of height.

So much for our very brief sketch of how some of the parts carved out above might be pieced together into a recognisably Levinasian ethics. To reiterate, the main goal of this sketch has been to illustrate the possibility of such a piecing together.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper, we have offered a schematic way of understanding the differences between the range of normative standings that at various points Levinas attributes to the other in the encounter. We have shown that the other might have the standing both to command and to demand, where the latter alone presupposes the independent existence of a moral order. We have also shown that if the other has the status of a giver, and if this is thought to be sufficient to explain the ethical relation between self and other, then all of the other standings Levinas mentions in the dimension of depth appear quite superfluous. In that light, it is perhaps judicious that Levinas in fact avoids speaking of the other as a giver in this sense – see note 8. We have further offered a lens through which the subtle difference between the supplication, and the revelation, of the vulnerable other can be appreciated.

Nonetheless, in the last substantive section of this paper we have sketched one way – perhaps among several – that some of Levinas' core concepts can be brought together into a recognisably Levinasian ethics. On our interpretation, the encounter with the other provides a grounds for ethics by showing how moral beliefs could in principle be well-founded. The fact that in the encounter the subject is struck by the other's vulnerability in an epiphany, will partly allay the worry that we are duped by morality. But this defence against moral scepticism can be combined with a subsequent view of the other – in their unfathomable infinity – as having the practical authority to hold the subject to account for adherence to the imperative moral reasons that arise from the recognition of their moral value and their neediness. In this sense, there is a distinctively Levinasian way, and a distinctively Levinasian rationale, for putting

together the two main normative dimensions (of height and depth), thereby giving Levinas' ethics a coherence that it might otherwise seem to lack.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 1969).

<sup>2</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1987): 96-7.

<sup>3</sup> Michael L. Morgan, *Discovering Levinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007): chapter 3.

<sup>4</sup> See Robert Stern, 'Divine Commands and Secular Demands: On Darwall on Anscombe on "Modern Moral Philosophy"', *Mind* 123 (2014): 1095–1122.

<sup>5</sup> For an account of how it might be possible for someone to intentionally create new obligatory reasons for another person, see David Enoch, 'Giving Practical Reasons', *Philosophers' Imprint* 11 (2011).

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of some possible meta-ethical problems with positing in people the power to make moral commands, see Mark Schroeder, 'Cudworth and Normative Explanations', *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* 1 (2006).

<sup>7</sup> This possible line of interpreting Levinas thus pitches him as advancing a similar view to that of Stephen L. Darwall, *The Second-Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect, and Accountability* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard

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University Press, 2006). For further discussion, see Robert Stern, 'Levinas, Darwall, and Løgstrup on Second-Personal Ethics', ed. Michael L. Morgan (Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

<sup>8</sup> In TI, the terminology of gift and generosity are usually employed in the other direction, with the subject as the one doing the giving, e.g. TI p. 205. There is nonetheless an interpretation of Levinas's account according to which the transformation that the other engenders in the subject is itself a kind of gift, with normative implications. For a reading of this sort, see Sarah Horton, 'The Joy of Desire: Understanding Levinas's Desire of the Other as Gift', *Continental Philosophy Review* 51 (2017): 1–18. Horton also makes clear (p. 7) that these normative implications generated by the other's 'gift' of transforming the subject are not derived from any sense of reciprocity that would be in tension with Levinas' commitment to the asymmetry of the relation between self and other.

<sup>9</sup> Consider, for example, TI p. 51: 'To approach the Other in conversation is to welcome his expression, in which at each instant he overflows the idea a thought would carry away from it. It is therefore to *receive* from the Other beyond the capacity of the I, which means exactly: to have the idea of infinity.'

<sup>10</sup> See James H.P. Lewis, 'The Discretionary Normativity of Requests', *Philosophers' Imprint* 18 (2018).

<sup>11</sup> A consideration is a reason in an externalist sense if that consideration counts in favour of an agent undertaking a certain action irrespective of whether the agent in question knows about or is motivated by that consideration. Although, it should be noted that there are some variants of internalism that would count the other's vulnerability as a reason for the subject to act in the other's interest even before the subject has come to recognise this vulnerability, on a counter-factual basis: that if the subject were to acknowledge the other's vulnerability then this consideration would motivate them to act in the other's interest.

<sup>12</sup> Levinas at one point describes the other's *gaze* as that which actively brings about the subject's epiphany (TI, p. 75). By contrast, he normally uses the term 'teaching' in connection with the other's act of revealing their height and infinity, rather than their vulnerability. But one should not read too deeply into the fact that in his vocabulary the notion of teaching seems to have more to do with the other's height than their depth. After all, Levinas takes these two dimensions to be inseparable sides of the same coin. There are terms that seem to be connected only with height, such as the other's *infinity* being *taught* by the other as *Lord* and *Master* and occasioning the subject's *generosity* and *hospitality*. But these concepts cannot be understood in isolation from the dimension of depth. For example, it is only because the other is not only infinite but also vulnerable that it makes sense for the subject to respond to their teaching with the gift of generosity and hospitality. So

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even though he tends not to put things in such terms, there is a Levinasian sense in which the other's vulnerability is part of what the other teaches the subject.

<sup>13</sup> It should be noted that some gift-giving does only succeed if the normative standing of the giver is recognised by the recipient. If I refuse your tokens of affection then you have not given them at all. But not all gift-giving is like this. For example, it is possible for a gift to be given anonymously, in which case it can be given successfully without any recognition of giver by recipient. The interpretation of Levinas as saying that the other gives to the subject should be understood as more analogous with this latter, anonymous, gift-giving rather than the former sort which is conditional on recognition.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Thompson, 'What Is It to Wrong Someone? A Puzzle about Justice', in *Reason and Value: Themes from the Moral Philosophy of Joseph Raz*, edited by R. Jay Wallace et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004): 339.

<sup>15</sup> It is a 'debunking' kind of moral scepticism which is a relevant concern for Levinas, rather than a 'why be moral?' kind, which is not. For more on that distinction, see Robert Stern, 'Moral Scepticism, Constructivism, and the Value of Humanity', in *Kantian Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 91-94; and for a consideration of Levinas in the light of this distinction, see Robert Stern, 'Others as the Grounds of Our Existence: Levinas, Løgstrup, and Transcendental Arguments in Ethics', in *Transcendental Inquiry : Its History, Methods and Critiques*, ed. Halla Kim and Steven Hoeltzel (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 181–208.

Another point at which Levinas mentions this concern with moral scepticism is TI, p. 202: 'What we call the face is precisely this exceptional presentation of a self by a self, incommensurable with the presentation of realities simply given, always suspect of some swindle, always possibly dreamt up.' So again, as in the Preface, it is a relevant consideration for Levinas that the ethical significance of the encounter with the other could be illusory. While discussing p. 202 in TI, it is also incumbent on us to note that the preceding sentence to the one just quoted makes a point that seems at first blush to be at odds with a claim that we make in the present paper. We claim that Levinas can be read as saying that in the face the subject encounters the value of the other. However, on p. 202, Levinas says, 'The presentation of being in the face does not have the status of a value'. So at first blush this is indeed textual evidence against our proposed reading. However, it is quite clear in the context of the passage that what Levinas means here by 'the status of a value' is something like the status of a socially constructed fact, a truism to be passed around from one person to the next, but which could turn out to be nothing more than a societal prejudice. That kind of socially constructed fact resides,

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Levinas says, in 'the ambiguity of the true and the false which every truth risks – an ambiguity, moreover, in which all values move' (TI, p. 202). And certainly for Levinas, the ethical significance of the other that the subject encounters in the face is nothing of this sort. It turns out, therefore, that Levinas' claim here sits quite comfortably with our reading for while the other's ethical significance is not a mere value in the sense that Levinas has in mind, it is of course a kind of value in another sense. That is, this significance which the subject directly encounters, in a way that cannot be immediately doubted, is such that it warrants valuing-attitudes of concern, and is such that the subject is motivated and warranted to act in its interest. On a more neutral conception of the term than the one Levinas uses at this point in the text, this is just what it is for something to be a value.

<sup>16</sup> This second criterion is controversial. A particularly important recent interpreter of Levinas is Diane Perpich who would reject this criterion. Perpich claims that 'there is no ethical "because" generated by the face; it is not *because* the other is rational, or feels pain, is vulnerable, or is a fellow human being that I come to owe him or her ethical consideration' (Diane Perpich, 'Levinas and the Face of the Other', in *The Oxford Handbook of Levinas*, ed. Michael L. Morgan (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pre-print online 2018, p. 12. However, we think that the emphasis that Levinas gives to his explanation of ethics as arising from the encounter with the face warrants interpreting him in such a way that both of our criteria are satisfied. It may be that an account like Perpich's that eschews one or both of these criteria does ultimately prove defensible, but this will be because such an account possesses merits that successfully outweigh the interpretative cost of forgoing our criteria. The point for now is just that in any event, failing to meet these criteria is an interpretative cost.

<sup>17</sup> We are not claiming here that this is the only way to understand in Levinasian terms why he appeals to both 'height' and 'depth. For example, it can be argued that the reason that both the dimensions of height and depth are required in Levinas' account is that only when both are included can Levinas explain the *asymmetry* of the ethical relation, where the fact that the moral reasons to act in the other's interest are not reciprocal between subject and other is an independently important plank of his outlook. Alternatively, it could be said that both these dimensions are required to maintain the 'alterity' of the other, who thus cannot be conceived as simply 'the same' as the subject, and where the oscillation between height and depth is a significant element in the subject's inability to arrive at a stable and fixed categorization of the other. Rather than raising an overt criticism to such lines of interpretation, we are simply offering an alternative way to explain why both height and depth belong in the account.

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<sup>18</sup> It should be noted that, as we are speaking here about the authority invested in an individual, it can be argued on Levinas's behalf that this cannot come merely from the dimensions of 'depth', as while such dimensions can provide grounds for care, they cannot in themselves provide grounds for such individual authority.

<sup>19</sup> This is a notion associated with Marxism and critical theory in general, but particularly Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)', in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 127–86.

<sup>20</sup> We are grateful to the editors of this volume for their very helpful comments on a previous draft, and also to Diane Perpich, Matt Prout, Simon Thornton and Daniel Viehoff.