Chapter 3
Sincerely Yours.
Towards a Phenomenology of Me

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Abstract  Here I am – for you. How does Levinas describe and analyse this amazing discovery? What does it imply about my ipseity and why should mutual respect be founded in a double (chiastic) asymmetry? This contribution takes up these questions by sketching Levinas’s accounts of the economic and ethical subject, clarifying the meaning of asymmetric height in relation to the evocation of the height of the ‘Most High’, and then delineating the sense of the term ‘passivity’. The author argues that radical passivity must be understood as ‘patience’, not as an ‘ontological’ passivity whose meaning is drawn from impersonal phenomena. In this way, the central Levinasian insight, that responsibility does not derive from a self-sufficient subject in relation to objects or even from a subject dependent on a medium or being in which it is immersed, is able to be preserved without a complacent or merely passive acceptance of evil or suffering. From the analysis of the patient self, consideration then turns to the question of whether and how a phenomenology of ‘me’ is possible. The notion of ‘election’ comes to the fore as the moment in which ‘I’ in relation to you am given a more direct access to experience and expression of myself and my own concern for myself, without yet eclipsing or debasing the height of the Other.

In this contribution, I would like to combine two tasks: (1) explain how Emmanuel Levinas analyses ‘the I’ (le moi, me, or – in a generalizing way – le soi); and (2) indicate how I receive and respond to his analysis. In doing this, I shall describe several dimensions of ‘me’ – in the sense of ‘the I’ or ‘the me’ that every human individual experiences as his/her own – in order to show how these dimensions together constitute a unique person who can designate him-/herself by pronouncing the personal pronoun ‘I’ or ‘me’. As levels or layers of ‘me’, these dimensions must be integrated in a philosophical anthropology that shows their coherence within the corporeal existence of human spirituality. Although Levinas himself does not extensively dwell on the mutual influence of each dimension on all others, their integration remains a task for further elaboration.

In Totalité et Infini, Levinas dedicates seventy pages to the constitution of the human individual as an ego that participates in the ‘economy’ of a world in which the fulfilling of his/her needs and wants establishes this ego as the centre of all enjoyable possibilities (TI, 79–149/107–174). Use and exploitation, hunting, fish-
ing and farming, dwelling, labour and consumption, but also thinking, reading, and aesthetic pleasures compose a world of enjoyment (*jouissance*), of which I am the living sovereign for whom the universe exists.

To live is to live on… (*vivre de…*) and this allows me to enjoy my immersion in the elements of water, light, earth and air, flesh, and ideas, while being animated by a desire for happiness and harmony. Levinas’s phenomenology of *jouissance* has been paraphrased often enough to dispense me from dwelling on its details (Peperzak 1993: 147–161). Let me therefore immediately formulate two questions that are not fully answered in his descriptions.

First, Levinas’s insistence on the hedonistic, almost paradisiacal, aspects of the human life-world leaves pain, disaster, and endurance in the shadow. Would a complete description not force us to tone down the ego-centric structure of the elemental economy of enjoyment and naïve happiness? Would ‘interiority’ still be an accurate characterization of this economy, if we equally stressed the hard and painful aspects of our being exposed to the hostile elements of nature and history? If endurance is necessary to resist and cope with elements, forces, or ‘gods’ that spell disaster and if we take our attempts at expulsion and destruction of such forces into account, should we not place greater emphasis on the ambiguity of a life that abandons itself to the elements? Shouldn’t we stress that everyone is also assailed and victimized by primitive hostilities, already on this level of existence?

We do not find an answer to these questions in *Totalité et Infini*, but in some later essays Levinas intensely scrutinizes the meaning of suffering. Even then, however, it remains a question as to what extent his earlier phenomenology of living as enjoyment should not be amended in order to do more justice to life as a mixture of happiness and misery or splendour and horror, and to the earth as a sojourn or journey in a valley of joys and tears.

Second, in his display of the worldly economy as an arrangement of elementary happiness, Levinas states that enjoyment provides the ego with a certain independence and a ‘presence to itself’, which guarantees its interiority. Enjoyment realizes a basic identity and subjectivity. Perhaps more emphasis on our resistance and endurance

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1 Levinas does mention the threatening, destabilizing, nocturnal, destructive, and perfidious aspects of the *apeiron* that makes human life dangerous and insecure (TI, 114–116/140–142), but their consequences for a phenomenology of our ‘vital’ experiences seem to remain marginal.

2 In the long section on ‘Interiority and Economy’, pain and suffering are mentioned very rarely (cf. TI, 118, 138–139/145, 164–165) and their relevance is not thematized. On 87/115, the relative importance of suffering in the economy of life is expressed in the following words: ‘*La souffrance est une défaillance du bonheur*’ (‘Suffering is a failure of happiness’).

3 See TI, 82/110: ‘*vivre de… dessine l’indépendance même, l’ indépendance de la jouissance et de son bonheur qui est le dessin originel de toute indépendance*’ (‘[L]iving from… delineates independence itself, the independence of enjoyment and of its happiness, which is the original pattern of all independence’). Cf. also 86/114: ‘*La jouissance réalise l’ indépendance … La subjectivité prend son origine dans l’ indépendance et dans la souveraineté de la jouissance*’ (‘Enjoyment realizes independence … Subjectivity originates in the independence and sovereignty of enjoyment’); 89/116: ‘*Avoir froid, faim, soif, être nu, chercher abri – toutes ces dépendances à l’égard du monde, devenus besoins, arrachent l’être instinctif aux anonymes menaces pour constituer un être indépendant du monde, véritable sujet capable d’assurer la satisfaction de ses besoins*’