Levinas Between Agape and Eros

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Anders Nygren's *Agape and Eros*, first published in the 1930s, was a landmark treatment of the radical distinction between eros and agape. Realizing that the Christian Bible makes large use of agape and little use of eros, Nygren seeks to understand why this is the case. Eros, Nygren tells us, is largely associated with Plato while agape is largely associated with Paul. Where eros is the desire to behold and participate in divine attributes, to make them part of oneself, agape is God's love freely bestowed on us. Although the most colloquial usage of eros does not point to a religious connotation, eros, like agape, is deeply religious in its original meaning, even as the two terms differ in significant ways.

We can see remnants of this same discussion in the ethical project of Emmanuel Levinas, which became the subject of terrific criticism, precisely because he separated the ethical relation from the erotic experience. As a result, Levinas's commentators frequently compare Levinas's ethics to Christian agape. Using the same distinction between agape and eros, even if implicitly, these commentators conclude that if Levinas distances the ethical relation from eros, his ethics must be like agape. Conversely, other commentators, for example, Luce Irigaray, prefer to bring together Levinas's ethics and eros while still maintaining some of the structure of Levinasian ethics. That is, they are not satisfied with this separation, yet they are persuaded by some of the structure that identifies Levinas's ethical relation.

If we keep in mind what ethics and eros mean for Levinas, it is not clear that this bridge from ethics to eros can be completed. Nor is it clear that Levinas has Christian agape in mind when he describes our responsibility for the Other. Thus, it seems that we must now address both issues at once: Levinas's ethical relation as distinct from the erotic and also as distinct from agape. This essay uses Nygren's examination of these two terms in order to think through how the relationship between eros and agape stands today, and in particular what this discussion means for Levinas's project. I then turn to some recent attempts to bridge the erotic/ethical distinction in Levinas's project to see if there is a way to think productively about the intersection of eros and ethics and still maintain the integrity of Levinas's ethics.

In his introductory discussion, Nygren recalls the distinction Pausanias made between vulgar eros and heavenly eros found in Plato's *Symposiwm*. The distinction is significant for Nygren. If the only kind of eros is a love for sensible objects—earthly, sensual love—then there is not much point in undertaking the comparison with agape, which is often under-
stood as God’s love, freely given. Nygren identifies this kind of eros as vulgar, and he admits that there is no relation between vulgar eros and Christian Agape.

Heavenly eros, as its name suggests, is the spiritualized version of vulgar eros. The latter is simply the desire for the physical object, for sensual pleasure. Undoubtedly, it is to “vulgar” eros that most of us refer when we employ the term in the context of our love relationships. Hence, one can see how the religious connotation of the term has been lost. Yet, as Nygren indicates, vulgar eros cannot be what Plato means when he refers to erotic love. As we know, Plato was keen to make the distinction between the material and non-material, with preference for the latter. Nygren argues that “heavenly” eros is “vulgar” eros sublimated into its highest spiritualized form. Where vulgar eros further ties the soul to the material world, heavenly eros moves that desire to the spiritual such that the soul is separated from the material world and desires those “objects” of the spiritual world.

Yet Nygren is quick to point out that heavenly eros is often mistakenly assumed to be yet another step on the way to agape. That is, if heavenly eros were further sublimated we would arrive at agape. He argues against this point, claiming that heavenly eros is the born rival to agape; it is the highest possible thing of its kind. Agape, he tells us, stands alongside eros, not above it. This relationship and this distinction between the two reveal why the discussion is so important: both are spiritualized forms of love. Yet they stand alongside one another; neither is the precursor nor the goal of the other. Nygren’s brief introductory remarks indicate a qualitative gap that separates eros and agape and that cannot be bridged. Heavenly eros is not simply an undeveloped form of agape. Instead, they are viewed as being in tension with each other. Why, then, choose agape over eros?

Levinas’s own view of eros changes over the course of his writings. In his early work from the 1940s Levinas equates eros with the feminine, where the latter inaugurates alterity. Eros takes on a sexualized tone in Totality and Infinity (1961). Levinas’s “Phenomenology of Eros” in Totality and Infinity emphasizes the distinction between ethics and eros. Interestingly, his use of eros virtually disappears in the philosophical work of the 1970s. It is worth revisiting these two primary discussions of eros for two reasons. One, we can see the radically different use of each and how that use changes over time. Second, it is actually his use of eros in the early work that might allow us to think about the intersection of eros and ethics. If eros denotes that which is different, that to which I am drawn in terms of otherness, then we might be able to make the case for a transcendent dimension of eros, although it is still not clear that this will allow us to find an intersection between ethics and eros.
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Transforming Eros

In the last part of *Time and the Other* Levinas explains what he means by a relation with the other. He claims that if a relationship is to be truly intersubjective it cannot be reciprocal. For Levinas, alterity already characterizes the intersubjective relationship: “The Other is what I myself am not” (TO 83/TA 75). The alterity of the other thus prohibits a reciprocal relation. It is not simply that the relationship with the other, as Levinas conceives it, is impossible if the two participants are symmetrical to each other. The relationship is impossible because there is no other; they are the same, they could each be other. To assume symmetry indicates a misunderstanding of the nature of such a relation. Simply by being other, that is, simply by being not me, the other is alterity. The intersubjective space is asymmetrical insofar as the other is characterized as those who are most vulnerable, while I am the rich and powerful. The asymmetry has less to do with the space that separates than it does with the actual relation that the subject has to the other, for the relationship with alterity is neither spatial nor conceptual. Who is the other, and what does the other become, precisely, in the face of the subject viewing it?

Eros, in Levinas’s early work, characterized by the feminine, is the original form of this alterity. He characterizes the feminine, the creation of woman as exemplified in Eve’s relationship to Adam, as the “absolutely contrary contrary [le contraire absolument contraire], whose contrariety is in no way affected by the relationship that can be established between it and its correlative, the contrariety that permits its terms to remain absolutely other” (TO 85/TA 77). The feminine is the example in which “the alterity of the other appears in its purity” (TO 85/TA 77). For Levinas, the formal structure of sexual difference precludes one sex from being assimilated into the other; accordingly, sexual difference defies the Parmenidean notion of the one, and instead maintains a reality of multiples, or twos (TO 85/TA 77).

For Levinas, the feminine, wearing the veil of radical alterity, accomplishes the break in Parmenidean unity; it breaks the totality. That is, the feminine allows for separation and individuation, but in a positive sense. Levinas thus believes that there is a sense of alterity that is not merely the “reverse side of its [the other’s] identity” [TO 85/TA 77]. He believes that there is a sense of alterity that is not characterized as merely the opposition of two species of a genus. This elusive alterity, for Levinas, is the feminine. By making this claim, he does not cast the feminine as simply the “opposite” sex, nor does he define the feminine as a negation. It is instead contrariety. The feminine is an alterity that serves as an interruption.

We could say that the feminine is the transcendental condition of
reality as multiple. Like Nygren, Levinas also turns to Plato’s *Symposium* for comparison. However, Levinas’s view of love contrasts with the view we find in Aristophanes’s speech in Plato’s *Symposium*. According to Aristophanes, the angry gods punish the humans, who were originally joined to their lovers, by splitting the creatures in half. The creatures are left wandering the Earth, searching eternally for their “other halves.” According to Aristophanes, love arises from a lack. In contrast, Levinas insists that sexual difference is not the result of a duality of two complementary terms, “for two complementary terms presuppose a pre-existing whole” (TO 86/TA 78). Love, according to Levinas, is not to be posited as a previously existing fusion that must be renewed.

Levinas’s depiction of eros changes radically in his 1961 book, *Totality and Infinity.* While the language of justice opens the ethical relationship to the other, the language of eros turns to cooing and laughter. Most significantly, the language that marks the ethical relation is absent from the erotic. Levinas identifies the love relationship as a return to the same. This characterization is distinctly different from his characterization of the ethical relation. He echoes the description of the structure of love that we find in Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* when he describes the love relationship as one in which what the lover wants is not simply to love the other but to have the beloved love him back. The erotic relationship is not a relation of infinity in itself. The erotic fulfills the ethical, the reaching out toward infinity, through fecundity—specifically through the birth of a son. The erotic, or the relationship with “the Other as feminine, is required in order that the future child come to pass from beyond the possible, beyond projects” (TI 267/TeI 245).

Levinas emphasizes the ambiguity that characterizes the erotic. The relation with the other in love turns into a relation of need, while also transcending such a relation. Love both presupposes the exteriority of the other, the beloved, while also exceeding this exteriority of the other (TI 254/TeI 232). He develops his discussion of love in *Time and the Other*, where he again refers to Aristophanes’s speech in Plato’s *Symposium*. Yet even in this later book Levinas still disagrees with the implication of Aristophanes’s story, namely, that fusion is desirable. The distinguishing feature in this discussion is his view that love is a mixture of immanence and transcendence (TI 254/TeI232). He finds compelling the ambiguous notion of love as a relation in which there is both a return to the self and a transcendence of self. Love, he tells us, “is an event situated at the limit of immanence and transcendence” (TI 254/TeI 232). The face of the other, of the beloved, reveals within it what it is not yet. It reveals the future that is never future enough, a future that is “more remote than possible” (TI 254–5/TeI 232–3). The ambiguity of love lies, finally, in the possibility for the Other to appear as an object of need,
and yet still retain its alterity. It appears as the object of a possible future, which we learn later is the child.

The possibility of enjoying the Other, of placing oneself at the same time beneath and beyond discourse—this position with regard to the interlocutor which at the same time reaches him and goes beyond him, this simultaneity of need and desire, of concupiscence and transcendence, tangency of the avowable and the unavowable, constitutes the originality of the erotic which, in this sense, is *the equivocal* par excellence (TI 255/TeI 233).

The beloved, the feminine who appears after the discussion of the ethical, in the form of eros and the possibility of fecundity, appears as both need (the present) and desire (the future). In other words, the beloved is the exterior or the beyond, and in this form we may find her transcendence. But regardless of how we situate the beloved in relation to the ethical, as either below, before, or beyond the ethical, the beloved as beloved remains outside the ethical.

In the “Phenomenology of Eros,” Levinas describes the relation with the beloved as resembling a relation with a child, insofar as a child does not have responsibility, is carefree, coquettish, and “a bit silly” (TI 263/TeI 241). Thus the beloved, in eros, becomes like an infant (TI 263/TeI 241) and has “quit her status as a person” (TI 263/TeI 241). Insofar as Levinas maintains the dimension of responsibility in the ethical relation, in this description of eros he reaffirms the space between the ethical and the erotic. The language of murder—or rather the language that commands us not to murder—and the face that makes murder impossible are all alien to eros (TI 262/TeI 241–2). The feminine is without signification and thus without language, the source of all signification (TI 257, 262/TeI 234, 241). In love, the feminine acts like a child who lacks responsibility.

Levinas further emphasizes the return to the same with his claim that love excludes the third party. The couple is sealed as a society of two. It remains outside the political, secluded in its intimacy, its dual solitude. It is closed and non-public (TI 265/TeI 242–3). Again, employing Sartre's formulation of love, Levinas observes that “if to love is to love the beloved bears me, to love is also to love oneself in love, and thus to return to oneself” (TI 266/TeI 244). The voluptuosity in love does not transcend itself. In this description we see what he means by a return to the self.

That love is also directed toward the future indicates that love itself provides the means by which it is a return to the self, but also that which moves away from itself. This movement away from itself is part of the
future secured by the relation of love. In Levinas’s analysis, the future is
the child (TI 266/TeI 244). The child, the future, the transcendence of
love, redeems the voluptuousness or the concern with itself. It opens up the
sealed society that the lovers construct (EE 89–93/DEE 153–9). Accord­ing
to Levinas, love escapes itself, escapes a return to the same, when
it is directed toward the future, when it engenders the child.

In light of the distinction, and the definitions, provided by Pausanias
and taken up by Nygren, we might have to admit that the eros Levinas
describes in the “Phenomenology of Eros” section of Totality and Infinity
more adequately resembles “vulgar” eros than it does “heavenly” eros.
Levinas’s own discussions support this point. In the 1982 interview,
“Philosophy, Justice, and Love,” Levinas’s interviewer asks how he un­
derstands the difference between eros and agape.10 Like Nygren, Levinas
responds that he is not a Freudian and consequently does not think that
agape comes from eros. He responds that eros is definitely not agape
and that agape “is neither derivative nor the extinction of love-Eros” (EN
113). He further distinguishes the two qualitatively when he responds
that “[i]n Totality and Infinity, there is a chapter on Eros, which is
described as love that becomes enjoyment, whereas I have a grave view
of Agape in terms of responsibility for the Other” (EN 113).

The above question followed his answer to the previous question
about multiplicity in which Plato’s Symposium was introduced. In his
answer, Levinas tells his interviewer that fusion has been the defining or
essential feature of love, as it is typically understood. Yet he cites the
creation of man and woman in the Biblical story of creation as that which
undermines this sense of fusion—our Western view of ourselves and of
love (EN 113). Here man and woman are created and separated, and
then commanded to multiply. Levinas emphasizes that the introduction
of this command should help move us out of our egology; we cannot be
only for ourselves. He continues: “[i]n ethical and religious terms: you
will have someone to love, you will have someone for whom to exist, you
cannot be just for yourself” (EN 113). The command to multiply, not the
love relation itself, moves us out of ourselves towards the other. We see
this in Levinas’s philosophical project when he describes the birth of the
child as the result of the erotic relation.

Levinas’s answer to the eros-agape question does not indicate that he
thinks of his ethical project in terms of agape—especially agape as it is
traditionally understood by Christians—although he remains clear that his
view of the ethical relation is distinct from the erotic. That is, although he
distinguishes agape from eros, as he does ethics from eros, and although
he thinks of agape in terms of responsibility for the other, it is not clear
that his ethical project—the radical conception of the face to face and
the asymmetrical sense of responsibility—fits neatly into a Christian
conception of agape. In fact, he seems to indicate otherwise in his an-
swers to the questions posed to him in 1975 by the Dutch philosophers 
at the University of Leyden and recorded in “Questions and Answers” and 
published in his collection Of God Who Comes to Mind. Here Levinas is 
asked specifically about the biblical imperative to “Love your neighbor as 
yourself” (GCM 90). The questioner has asked if this phrase cannot 
translate into an understanding of the experience of the other as like 
one'self. Levinas replies that he is sympathetic to the perplexity that 
Buber and Rosenzweig expressed at this translation of the Hebrew. They 
asked, does this not mean that one loves oneself most? For them and for 
Levinas, to accept this translation and hence this meaning is to under-
mine the very meaning of the Hebrew Bible, which for Levinas is about 
the Other. Buber and Rosenzweig offered several different possibilities 
for translating this phrase from the Hebrew, but none retains the idea of 
loving one's neighbor like oneself, a formulation that emphasizes self-
love.

Levinas repeats here what he emphasizes elsewhere: the Hebrew 
Bible supports many meanings, yet he tells us here that the meaning of 
any given phrase comes into view only when it is read in light of the 
context of the Hebrew Bible in its entirety, not simply in the context of 
the few phrases that come before or after it. For Levinas, “in the entirety 
of the [Hebrew Bible] there is always a priority of the other in relation to 
me. This is the biblical contribution in its entirety” (GCM 91). When he 
returns to the phrase in question, he answers his questioner with the 
folowing remarks:

The Bible is the priority of the other [l'autre] in relation to me. It is 
in another [autrui] that I always see the widow and the orphan. 
The other [autrui] always comes first. This is what I have called in 
Greek language, the dissymmetry of the interpersonal relationship. 
If there is not this dissymmetry, then no line of what I have writ-
ten can hold. And this is vulnerability (GCM 91; emphasis added).

It is precisely this radical view of asymmetry, coupled with his concept of 
passivity—the responsibility that claims me before I choose—that sets 
apart Levinas’s ethics from any traditional conception of ethics while also 
making this view of the ethical relation the target of strong criticism.

In his essay, “Levinas’s Agapeistic Metaphysics of Morals,” John 
Davenport argues that “the radically self-renouncing conception of agape 
on which Levinas models his metaphysics of responsibility is one we have 
good reason to reject ... [since] it incorrectly infers from the uncondi-
tionality of our duty to love that agape cannot include appeals for re-
ciprocal respect and relations of universal justice.” Davenport rightly
asserts that since Levinas relies on the Bible, and these Biblical allusions cannot be simply figurative, they must therefore be theological. However, we need to be careful in assuming that all readings of the Torah are the same. Levinas is clear that he reads the Bible—the Torah—Jewishly, which means reading it alongside the rabbinic interpretations. As he noted above, his reading of the phrase that refers to neighborly love simply does not translate easily into the common usage of “as thyself,” a basis of Christian agape. Second, as Levinas states, any ethics that explicitly allows for mutuality risks the economy of debt and immediately loses the radicality he intends. Davenport is correct that Buber’s philosophy had an impact on Levinas’s own philosophical thought. However, Levinas criticizes Buber’s “I-thou” relationship on precisely the point that Davenport believes they agree.

To critique further the extreme view of agape that Levinas appears to have accepted for his ethics, Davenport contrasts this self-renunciation view of agape with a second strand, identified by Gene Outka as reconciliation. In this second strand of agape, neighbor love “is located somewhere between the formal symmetry of self-interested parties contracting for mutual advantage and the suspiciously ascetic demand for total self-denial” (341). Yet this second view is precisely the view that Elaine Pagels criticizes when she argues that the roots of agape are precisely to indicate a neighbor love that included only certain neighbors. She argues such love is based on this “inside-outside” construction. In other words, the mutuality, although it mitigates against a radical self-renunciation, comes at the price of a corrupt neighborly love. Thus, it is not clear that such universal love is even universal.\(^{14}\)

Agape is often said to derive from two commands in Matthew 22. The first is where we find Jesus telling his disciples to “Love the Lord your God with all of your heart, soul, and mind.” The second command is the one to which Levinas refers above, “to love your neighbor as yourself. All the law and the prophets hang on these two commandments” (Matthew 22: 37–41). The first command, found originally in the Torah, forms the basis of the Sh’ma, the central element of the Jewish prayer service. The second is problematic as we see in Levinas’s response above because it asks us to love the neighbor in terms of our own self-love—a potential issue with translation, but even as such, it implies an ethics based on the love of the self first and foremost. The larger problem, however, is simply that the commands are based on love and they are thought to be voluntary. For Levinas, ethics is neither about love nor is it voluntary. In fact, he says in this same interview that he does not use the word love much; “it is a worn-out and ambiguous word” (EN 108).

If Christian agape finds its roots in the Gospel of Matthew then there are further problems with the attempt to map Levinas’s ethics onto aga-
pe. For Levinas, ethical response is commanded by the Other person, not by God, even though he would say that in that command from the face is the other, the word of God is heard. In light of this point, we can see why Levinas quotes Matthew 25 when he speaks to Christians (EN 110). In Matthew 25 we see the response to those in need—the one who is hungry, thirsty, in need of clothes, the stranger. Thus, Levinas is clear to distinguish love, which is ambiguous from the actual response to the other, which does not require one to love the other.

Demonstrating that Levinas’s ethical relation does not map onto agape does not then leave the ethical relation free to map easily onto eros either. If we return then to the concept of eros, we can see why. Regardless of whether we choose “heavenly” eros or “vulgar” eros, we have a similar problem. In both concepts of eros, there is a return to the Same. Eros desires something to be brought into itself. In heavenly eros, the lover wants to attain the attributes of God, and thus it partakes in a spiritual relationship with another that will allow its soul to transcend. But this is still about the lover. In vulgar eros, the lover simply wants sensual pleasure and receives it by being in a physical relationship with the object of its desire. In the erotic relationship, sensual pleasure is typically exchanged—at least that is how we tend to think of healthy erotic relationships. We should not forget that in the erotic relationship each person can be viewed as the lover and in that role the lover desires the beloved, that is, the lover desires to be fulfilled. If we think back to the issue of exchange and Levinas’s determination to keep ethics from falling into an economy of debt, we can see the problem with the erotic relationship. Most significantly, it relies on the economy of debt. Once one lover is no longer desirous of or satisfied sensually by the other, the lover leaves the relationship. Lovers stay in the erotic relationship voluntarily. This is not the same for ethics, where my obligation to/responsibility for the other precedes any choice I make and is independent of any relationship I have to the other.

Yet this is also not to say that “vulgar” eros is categorically vulgar or disparaged. We need to be clear that Levinas describes the ethical relation with very specific parameters, and he does the same with the erotic relation. As noted above, we are commanded to multiply, that is, we are commanded to be pulled out of ourselves and towards another. For Levinas, eros is not transcendent, nor is it ethical—not because it is “vulgar” or “sensual” per se. That is, he is not simply an ascetic who has deemed eros vulgar simply because it is concerned with material or sensual/sensible pleasure. Rather—and this is the crucial point—ethics is transcendent because it pulls us out of ourselves towards another and thus places us in the presence of God.

Since ethics is an asymmetrical relationship it does not fall into the
trap of the economy of debt. This is essential to Levinas’s ethics. If we
dispense with the asymmetry or the notion of transcendence that places
us in the presence of God through God’s command to respond to the
face of the other, as revealed by the face of the other, we have radically
changed Levinas’s conception of the ethical relation. We might say that
this radicality prevents Levinas’s ethics from mapping easily onto Chris-
tian agape. Any discussion that attempts to connect these two relations
must be sensitive to these particular descriptions. Agape and Levinas’s
ethics might intersect, and they might even resemble each other, but
they do not neatly map onto each other.

Feminist Concerns and Levinasian Eros

The 2006 collection of essays, Toward a Theology of Eros, revisits the
question of agape and eros as it is specifically discussed in Nygren’s
work. The goal of this collection is to offer new ways of thinking about
both concepts in order to see if the distinction between them, and thus
between ethics and eros, still holds. One contributor, Mayra Rivera,
revisits this question by returning to Levinas’s work and the feminist
concerns that arise from it.

Rivera rightly characterizes Levinas’s project in terms of a dichotomy
between the sexual encounter and the ethical relation, thus opposing
eros and ethics. Rivera’s concerns, as noted in her essay, are certainly
not the first to be raised in response to Levinas’s dichotomy. Her
primary concern is that this “dichotomy threatens Levinas’s critical re-
formulation of transcendence,” and she turns to Irigaray to provide an
alternative account of bodily relations. Yet in spite of the help that
Irigaray provides, Rivera admits that there are limits nonetheless to her
analysis. In particular, she acknowledges that Irigaray’s framework is
heterosexual. As a result, Rivera supplements Irigaray’s analysis with the
work of Chicana scholars Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga, since they
offer tools that enable us to see a wider range of images of the body.

Let me say first that I am sympathetic to the concerns that feminist
scholars such as Rivera, Irigaray, and Chanter have raised in response to
Levinas’s project. These examinations of Levinas’s project require us to
think carefully about what he proposes and what the implications of his
ethical relation are. Rivera’s project contributes to this discussion by
including scholarship in Latin American feminist theory. The work of
these Chicana scholars that Rivera includes in her own discussion provide
an important supplement to European or traditional feminist theory—
French or American.

My concern, however, is the initial move Rivera makes when she
turns from Levinas to Irigaray’s critique of Levinas. Rivera criticizes
Levinas's ethical project for setting eros apart from the ethical relation, and she turns to Irigaray's criticism of Levinas, which falls along similar lines, for help. As I have argued elsewhere, Irigaray's critique of Levinas and those who rely on that critique fail to see the radical nature of his ethical relation—that it must be asymmetrical. These criticisms then fall into two possible categories for arguing one of two possible positions. The first is that ethics must become more like eros, and thus be mutual, in which case Levinas's ethical project has been completely undermined. The second is my deeper concern; this is that they slip into a moment of overlooking the asymmetrical dimension of the ethical relation. Thus, their criticism of this dichotomy begins to look as if they are arguing for an asymmetrical erotic relationship.17 As I have stated in earlier writings, we, as feminists, should be careful for what we wish.

Rivera's criticisms do not emerge from a lack of awareness regarding Levinas's characterization of ethics and eros. She repeats Levinas's claim that ethics is not a return while eros, in its seeking satisfaction, returns to itself. In response to Levinas's distinction she cites Irigaray's claim that cycles "are intrinsic to the temporality of nature, to the life of the body. A purely linear transcendence is famously prone to leave the flesh behind." The implication of Rivera's comment is that a return to the self is equivalent to "cycles" in the life of the body. But this does not seem to be what Levinas means by a return to self.

Levinas's concern is that ethics maintains the asymmetry or we will wind up in an economy of debt. Ethics then becomes a matter of exchange: I give something to you and you give something back to me. Worse, it becomes conditional. If we wish to conflate eros and ethics, that is, if we are going to make ethics mutual or "cyclical" in any sense of that term, we need to recognize this danger. The problem also cuts the other way. If we conflate eros and ethics and maintain the asymmetry, then we need to worry about what this means for eros. I wish to be clear that I am not referring to how erotic relationships might function actually, or in practice. That is to say, I realize that erotic relationships are frequently not fully mutual and that one person may be dominated—in any number of ways—by another. My point is that as Levinas understands eros, eros does not preclude a mutual relationship or a relationship of exchange. Eros, as Levinas understands it, is a relationship where one seeks another in return because one finds the other physically or sensually appealing, and this seeking does not undermine the concept of eros. As feminists, we need to be careful about wanting to make eros into an ethical relation as Levinas defines it.

Returning to Rivera's concern that a transcendence as Levinas defines it leaves the flesh behind does not ring true in Levinas's case. Although Levinas separates sensual pleasure from ethics, he is very attuned to the
body and bodily needs. As early as his book of 1934, *On Escape*, he notes the needs of the body as a way of shattering the myth of freedom, independence, and self-sufficiency so prevalent in modern philosophy. Forty years later in *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas repeatedly makes reference to the “bread from my mouth” to indicate the ethical response to the other. Thus, in response to Rivera’s claim that this distinction between ethics and eros “cannot quite accommodate encounters between bodies, where one is inside the other, where one embraces the other” seems to forget that ethical relation in *Otherwise than Being* is defined as maternity, where one imagines the baby enveloped in the mother’s womb.¹⁹

My concern is that the question has been begged; critics want to begin from the standpoint that eros and ethics, or eros and a certain kind of transcendence, map onto each other, and then proceed to show why Levinas’s distinction does not hold. Although I share this concern, we need to be careful that we do not confuse, or even conflate, different senses of transcendence. For Levinas, transcendence is hearing the word of God in the face of the other that commands me to respond to the other, without any concern for what the other may do for me or whether the other may accept my response. Any other view of transcendence and, in particular, any view of transcendence that allows for a return to the same or self, is simply not the one Levinas has in mind. If we attempt to compare them, we might be comparing apples and oranges—two completely different senses of transcendence. Additionally, any view of transcendence that does allow this return and wants to include an ethical dimension will need to explain how it avoids the economy of debt. Moreover, it will need to define what it means by ethics.

In light of this point, it is not clear that Rivera’s criticisms stand. Yet her essay nonetheless asks us to reconsider the relationship between ethics and eros. In spite of my claims above, and in spite of Levinas’s intention to think of eros and ethics as distinct, I would nonetheless suggest that they intertwine in very important ways. One place where we might find ethics and eros meeting is ironically in parenting, that is, in the parent’s relationship, and maybe specifically, the mother’s relationship to her child. This relationship becomes all the more important within the context of Levinas’s project and the role of the teaching dimension that we also find in the parent-child relationship.²⁰ Levinas offers both the teacher-student and parent-child as the paradigmatic ethical relationships, and I would argue that it is in both of these that we find a necessary erotic dimension. By erotic here I simply mean desire, an appetitive desire, that is not necessarily sexual desire.²¹

In her landmark book, *The Myths of Motherhood*, Shari Thurer examines the myths of motherhood, from the Goddess figure to the
Virgin Mary to the stereotypical “Jewish mother,” by allowing the voice of the mother to be heard. First published in 1994, the book is an impressive work with an extensive bibliography that spans literature, psychoanalysis, philosophy, and feminist theory. Most intriguing, however, is that the twenty-page index does not include separate entries, either as major headings or subheadings, for “love,” “desire,” or “eros.” This lack reveals less about neglect of the author than it does about the categories in history through which we are willing to examine motherhood.

Nonetheless, we can look to narratives in the Hebrew Bible to provide several examples where eros is intimately tied to fecundity, to the birth of a child and specifically to the future of the Jews. For example, the rabbinic commentary on the Biblical character of Ruth explicitly mentions and emphasizes Ruth’s sexual assertiveness as a positive attribute that yields the likes of King David. We see this connection in the way that Levinas reads the Song of Songs in light of his own conception of ethics and eros. Finally, we see this again in the narrative surrounding Sarah’s life, which presents a nuanced image of motherhood and its relationship to the erotic. It is in this image that we might find the most interesting and compelling arguments for the intersection of eros and ethics. Yet in spite of this intersection, and potential for a blurred boundary, it is not clear that ethics and eros overlap in ways for which others hope.

I have written on this topic previously, so I will be brief. The story of Isaac’s life begins with Sarah hearing the news that she will give birth to a son. Her response is laughter. Interestingly, the rabbis interpret her laughter not at the incredulity that she is old and will now bear a child, though certainly that would have been an understandable response. Rather, her laughter comes from fully recognizing what it will take to conceive the child: sexual intercourse at the age of ninety. The hearty laugh is the response to the idea of sexual pleasure at her ripe old age. What needs to happen, happens and Isaac, whose name means “one who laughs,” is born. Isaac’s name now embodies Sarah’s pleasure in conceiving him. Through his name he simultaneously signals Sarah’s joy and while also mocking the very idea that he was to enter the world as he did.

On several occasions, Sarah’s love for Isaac is revealed in the narrative. The first occurs when she sends Ishmael and Hagar away. The second is seen in the rabbinic commentary to her death. As some of the rabbis speculate, Sarah dies because she hears what was to happen on Mt. Moriah. She cannot bear even the idea that her beloved son might have been killed at the hands of her own husband, the child’s father, and so she dies. In Levinasian terms, we might even say that she substituted herself for him. Does she erase Isaac’s mortality? Of course not. But in
this moment, at this time, she dies in place of him, and it cannot be ignored that her response is her response because she is Isaac's mother.

It is for this reason that while Levinas's ethics presents itself radically, and why the maternal image is so powerful, it is also at once the place where we see the limits of his ethical project. The rabbis's midrashim are speculative. We do not know that this is the reason that Sarah dies. What is interesting is that the rabbis speculate that this might be the case and certainly dying of heartbreak, though romantically cliché, is not only a cliché. Spouses often die soon after their beloved has died, and certainly one can imagine the love of a child to be so strong that when that child dies—unnatural in the cycle of life—one simply cannot bear life without him or her. Although we can imagine any number of people risking their lives to save another person who is simply a stranger, it is difficult to imagine someone simply dying because they hear of the death or possible death of a stranger. This is to say that it is not clear that Sarah would have died as the rabbis speculate that she did had the child been anyone but Isaac.

Maternity, interestingly, raises questions for both Levinas and agape. In Levinas's case, it is not a question of loving others but rather responding to them. The responsibility that emerges in maternity—prenatal and post-natal—entwines with the love the parent has for the child. This is the place, or the relationship, that seems to raise questions for Levinas's project, and in particular the connection between ethics and love—erotic or otherwise. As a result of this intertwining, this relationship becomes idiosyncratic; it is the relationship I have to this child. One can see then why the character of Sophie, in William Styron's novel, Sophie's Choice, is utterly destroyed psychologically as the result of having to choose which child lives and which child dies—although she is told that both will die if she does not pick one.

Recent commentators on Levinas suggest that he introduces the image of the maternal body in Otherwise than Being precisely because the father-child relationship presents problems just as I mentioned above. Yet it is not clear that the move to the maternal body alleviates those problems. Insofar as Levinas asks us to be like the maternal body, we must ask what the maternal body is like. On the one hand, we can look at the maternal body mechanistically: it is transformed by the presence of a fetus growing inside of it. But the maternal body is not simply a pregnant body. On the other, if we want to acknowledge the unchosen responsibility, we must also consider the woman. It is not simply a body that is responsible. Thus, the woman responds to this baby, in some cases before the baby is even present. She responds by preparing the body for pregnancy and by caring for the baby once it is born. It is not always clear where the boundaries of the maternal body
can be drawn.

Similar to the problem with Levinas's ethics, the love a mother has for her child also runs contrary to agape, which asks for a love of humanity. It is not that parental love precludes this other love, but rather it puts boundaries on it. The love for the child and, I would argue, for one's spouse simply places them in a different space. It is not that I respond to them ethically because I love them; rather, through my daily interaction with them and my responsibility to care for them, my love for these particular individuals intensifies. In turn, my responsibility increases. Thus, while I maintain that Levinas's ethical project is between agape and eros, we can see how the intensity of love for a child can move between eros and responsibility. I do not mean to say that the child is the sexually desired object, but rather the relationship the parent has to the child is not like the one to the stranger. Although Levinas wants his ethics to be universal, in the sense that I can respond to any other in the face to face, it is simply not the case that the face of my child is ever the anonymous face of the other.

Desire is transformed from the sensual pleasure and self-fulfillment of erotic love to the yearning to be with another who is both me and not me. Parenting, as Levinas points out, marks the intersection of transcendence and the return to the same. The relationship a parent has to a child is more than the "simple" responsibility for that child—to feed her, clothe her, and protect her. This basic responsibility, which Levinas identifies as the responsibility to the stranger, the widow, and the orphan, is entwined with the desire to be with the child, to marvel at her growth, and to help her become an ethical subject, the latter of which Levinas explicitly rejects in the general case of the ethical relation. If we recall, he tells us in his interview that we are obligated to the other regardless of whether the other accepts my gesture or not (GCM 93). I do care if my child takes my advice and it does matter to me if my child accepts my response to her. She is both me and not me, and her resistance to my attempts to influence her too much keep me honest as a parent. But unlike the stranger, she does have an obligation to me—and that is, as Lisa Guenther argues in her book *The Gift of the Other*, to accept my gift of birth which enables her to become a person who can respond to other others.

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Notes


7. Levinas, *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987). Hereafter cited as TO followed by the English and then the French page numbers. Levinas's inconsistent use of *other* (*autrul*) and *other* (*autre*) often makes the referent for each term unclear. Does the former term indicate a human other, while the latter term indicates death? Or is this problem simply the result of a lack of rigor on Levinas's part? With this complication in mind, I will proceed with the exegesis, much of which is excerpted from my book, *Levinas, Judaism, and the Feminine: The Silent Footsteps of Rebecca* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003).

8. See also Adriaan Peperzak, *Platonic Transformations* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997). Peperzak focuses on the use of eros in *Totality and Infinity*. However, his discussion provides an interesting context, in particular the influence of Plato on Levinas, in which to examine eros.


12. Here Davenport cites Buber’s influence on Levinas and the former’s I-thou relationship as influenced by the “neighbor-love commands of the Torah.” However, as we see in this question and answer session, Levinas is clear that he, like Buber and Rosenzweig, do not read the neighbor commands as they are typically translated. The Hebrew, and the Jewish understanding of that Hebrew, indicate a different, more radical meaning than simply a love of humanity. See Davenport, 332 and 332n2.


18. Rivera, 258.


20. We see that the Hebrew words for parent and teacher and the Hebrew word Torah all share the same root (resh and he). I wish to thank Professor
Peter Tarlow for pointing this out to me.

21. For a wonderful reading of Levinas on desire, see M. Jamie Ferreira, “The Misfortune of the Happy: Levinas and the Ethical Dimension of Desire,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 34, no. 3. Ferreira’s essay is interesting insofar as it argues for the appetitive dimension in Levinas’s conception of Desire.

