# From *Totality and Infinity*, Emmanuel Levinas

# A. METAPHYSICS AND TRANSCENDENCE

##### **1** Desire for the Invisible

"The true life is absent." But we are in the world. Metaphysics arises and is maintained in this alibi. It is turned toward the "else­where" and the "otherwise" and the "other." For in the most general form it has assumed in the history of thought it appears as a movement going forth from a world that is familiar to us, whatever be the yet unknown lands that bound it or that it hides from view, from an "at home" ["chez soi"]\* which we inhabit, toward an alien outside-of­ oneself *[hors-de-soi],* toward a yonder.

The term of this movement, the elsewhere or the other, is called *other*

in an eminent sense. No journey, no change of climate or of scenery could satisfy the desire bent toward it. The other metaphysically desired is not like the bread I eat, the land in which I dwell, the landscape I contemplate, like, sometimes, myself for myself, this I, that "other." I can "feed" on these realities and to a very great extent satisfy myself, as though I had simply been lacking them. Their *alterity* is thereby reabsorbed into my own identity as a thinker or a possessor. The metaphysical desire tends toward *something else entirely,* toward *the absolutely other*. The characteristic analysis of desire cannot explain away its singular pretension. As commonly interpreted, need need would be at the basis of desire; desire would characterize a being indigent and incomplete and fallen from its past grandeur. It would coincide with the consciousness of what has been lost; it would be essentially a nostalgia, a longing for return. But thus it would not even suspect what the veritably other is.

The metaphysical desire does not long to return, for it is desire for a land not of our birth, for a land foreign to every nature which has never been our fatherland and to which we shall never take ourselves. The metaphysical desire does not rest upon any prior kinship. It is a desire that cannot be satisfied. For we speak lightly of desire satisfied, of sexual needs or moral and religious needs. Love itself is thus taken to be the satisfaction of a sublime hunger. If this language is possible, then it is because most of our desires and love too are not pure. The metaphysical desire has another intention; it desires beyond everything that can simply complete it. It is like goodness – the desired does not fulfill it, but deepens it.

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It is a generosity nourished by the desired and thus a relationship that is not the disappearance of distance, not a bringing together, or- to circumscribe more closely the essence of generosity and of goodness- a relationship whose positivity comes from remoteness, from separateness for it nourishes itself, one might say, with its hunger. This desire is radical only if not the possibility of anticipating the desirable, if, that is, ' toward an absolute, unanticipatable alterity, if it does not think it beforehand, but moves towards it aimlessly, as approaching death. Desire is absolute if the desiring being is mortal and the Desired invisible.\_ Invisibility does not denote an absence of relation; it implies relations with what is not given, of which there is no idea. Vision is an adequation of the idea with the thing, a comprehension that encompasses. Non-adequation does not denote a simple negation or an obscurity of the idea, but-beyond the light and the night and beyond the knowledge measuring beings - the inordinateness of Desire is desire for the absolutely other. Besides the hunger one satisfies, the thirst one quenches and the senses one allays, the metaphysical desire for the other is beyond satisfactions, where no gesture by the body to diminish the aspiration is possible, where it is not possible to sketch out any known caress nor invent any new caress. A desire without satisfaction which, precisely, *understands* the remoteness, the alterity, and the exteriority of the other: For Desire this alterity, non-adequate to the idea, has a meaning. It is understood as the alterity of the Other and of the Most-High. The very dimension of height is opened up by metaphysical desire. That this height is no longer the heavens but the Invisible is the very elevation of height and its nobility. To die for the Invisible, this is metaphysics. This does not mean that desire can dispense with acts. But these acts are neither consumption, nor caress, nor liturgy.

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Demented pretens1on to the invisible, when the experience of the human in the twentieth century teaches that the thoughts of men are borne by needs which explain society and history, that hunger and fear can prevail over every human freedom and resistance. There is no question of doubting this human mysery, this dominion that things and the wicked exercise over man, this animality. But to be a man is to know that this is so. Freedom consists in knowing that freedom is in peril. But to know or to be conscious is to have time to avoid and forestall the instant of inhumanity. It is this perpetual postponing of the hour of the infinitesimal difference between man and non-man - that implies the disinterestedness of goodness, the desire of the absolutely other or nobility, the dimension of metaphysics.