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# The Phoenix Complex

## A Philosophy of Nature

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## 2 PHILOSOPHY'S THIRD PATH: PLATO/LEVINAS

The problem of life's finitude is a shared root of theological and philosophical thought in the East as much as in the West. Wherever we turn, we find evidence of an irresistible urge to demonstrate that life has meaning despite (but also thanks to) its inevitable end in death. The ruptured continuation of life after the end of a biological life lent itself to thinking in several guises, including reincarnation, the migration of the soul of the deceased to heavenly or hellish regions that are not in this world, and survival in one's progeny or in one's works, the material traces of one's activity.

Reincarnation is the most ecologically sensitive among the options, because it acknowledges the interconnectedness of different forms of life, while providing no certainty that in a subsequent life one would be or remain human. In Jainism, for instance, the soul (*jīva*) "sometimes is born as a worm, as an insect or as an ant" (*Uttarādhyayana Sūtra* 3.4). In Plato's most "eastern" dialogue, *Timaeus*, rebirth depends on one's actions and character in a previous human life: "and the tribe of birds are derived by transformation, growing feathers in place of hair, from men who are harmless [*akakōn andrōn*] but light-minded" (91d). The doctrine of reincarnation forces us to recognize our past or future selves in nonhuman creatures, softening the rigid boundaries set in systems of natural classification. In this sense, the ruptures that mortality represents appear as continuations from the standpoint of life itself, over and above its variegated forms, kinds, and species.

Regardless of the answers they give to the question of finitude, philosophy and theology operate within the conceptual space of the phoenix

complex. This axiom holds with respect to biological life and cultural existence, and even, to some extent, erodes the opposition between “nature” and “culture.” In particular, philosophy and theology tread the third path toward the universalization of the singular, which I have outlined in connection to the phoenix’s reproducibility or replaceability. Except that, in the Judeo-Christian paradigm, this world is replaced with otherworldly regions in the afterlife of heaven or hell, while, according to the philosophical perspective and doctrines of reincarnation, it is the individual who is, within limits, replaceable by that which or the one who issues from her.

A programmatic formulation of replaceability, which is also at the heart of the phoenix complex, surfaces in Plato’s *Symposium*, in the middle of teachings on the subject of love, with which Diotima gifts Socrates. Indeed, Socrates reports Diotima’s words, replacing *her* within the structure of the dialogue as much as in relation to his own students and listeners.<sup>1</sup> What is the crux of her teaching? Addressing Socrates, she says, “In this way everything mortal is preserved, not by remaining entirely the same forever, which is the mark of the divine, but by leaving behind that which is growing old and passing away something other and new after the kind of the [aging] one [*heteron neon egkataleipein oion auto hēn*]. By this means [*mechanē*], Socrates, what is mortal—the body and everything else—partakes of immortality [*thnēton athanasias metechei*]; but what is immortal does so differently” (208a-b).

In these lines, Diotima sketches out the mechanics of life that lives past its end without pretending to have become either eternal or divine. The term she uses is *mechanē* (device), which is the root of machine, as much as of machination. What is at issue, therefore, is a mechanism for the reproduction of life and a machination, slipping transcendence in the place of immanence, that is, allowing one to live *beyond* the physical and temporal limits of one’s biological existence.

The machine for reproducing what is growing old needs fuel: it needs to be powered by something, and, in keeping with the two senses of *mechanē*, this power is also double. On the face of it, everything is moved by the power (and the fire) of love—*L’amor che move il sole e l’altre stelle*, “Love that moves the Sun and other stars,” as Dante will put it in the final verse of his *Divine Comedy*. After all, Diotima’s entire discourse, as narrated by Socrates, her

lover, is on love, and it is ensconced within a larger dialogue on the subject of love, which is Plato's *Symposium*. It turns out, nevertheless, that love is itself in the service of something else; love is powered by yet another force, which is the desire for the kind of immortality that is practically attainable (or, at least, participable) by mortals. Hence Diotima's conclusion: "It is no wonder, then, that everything naturally values its own offspring. This universal zeal and love [*erōs*] is for the sake of immortality" (208b).

Let me indicate, in a rather abbreviated fashion, that the interpretation of *means* in terms of mechanics and machinations befits the phoenix complex, not least because, since antiquity, the accoutrements of the phoenix have been redolent of craftiness, a sinister trick, or an insidious lie. The clearest and the most literal statement to this effect is by Pliny the Elder, who gives, as the first example of medicines that are not trustworthy, "those said to be derived from the ashes and nest of the phoenix [*ex cinere phoenicis nidoque medicinis*], as though, forsooth, its existence were a well ascertained fact, and not altogether a fable [*non fabulosum*]" (*Historia naturalis* 29.viii). Tongue in cheek, he adds, "And then besides, it would be mere mockery to describe remedies that can only return to us once in a thousand years [*inridere est vitam remedia post millensimum annum reditura monstrare*]." Those who push remedies presumably made of phoenix's ashes and nest are charlatans, and, even if they were not, a medicine made of such rare materials as to be obtained every millennium is anything but useful or widely employable. A good dose of charlatanism is also detectable in the complex that borrows its name from the mythical bird: by its means, in which mechanics and machinations merge, it is possible to replace, renew, substitute the living, as though death had no finality about it and as though nothing substantially distinct has happened with the generation of new existents. Such are the roots of our metaphysics and their deleterious effects that reverberate globally today, whether with respect to the environmental crisis or with respect to proposed energy, lifestyle, and other solutions to it.

The mechanics of replacing an aging being with a newer copy of itself operate on the basis of two machinations. First, covered with the fig leaf of wishing to keep its object forever, love appears in the place of desire for immortality on the pretext that the strivings of *eros* are directed toward the

other. This is a machination, a scheming maneuver, because such a desire is, in the first and last instances, narcissistic, wishing for the preservation of oneself by means of the other. Second, the other appears in the place of the same as if there were no alterity in the other, as if *this* other were other to otherness itself. Matching the repudiation of my identity is the denial of the otherness of the other who will replace me with a younger version of myself.

The two machinations involve one another, are entwined among themselves and with the concept of transcendence within immanence, a material and ongoing resurrection of the dying or the dead. These machinations do not overlay (and, in overlaying, thwart the normal functioning of) the mechanism of life's reproduction; they are built into the mechanism as its engine, the driving force behind life's reproducibility. And isn't the intended outcome of *mechanē*, which Diotima describes by means of Socrates as her mouthpiece or for which Socrates recruits Diotima as a projection of his own quasi-mystical persona, a third machination, namely the inclusion of what is mortal (*thnēton*) in immortality (*athanasia*)?

Note that the mechanics and machinations of reproducibility and (or as) replaceability are not restricted to humans: according to Diotima, all mortals preserve themselves this way, by letting go of their simple and static self-identity in order to recover themselves in "something other and new" after "their own kind." It is not a matter of tricking the other or telling a lie to oneself, since the *mechanē* of life antedates and is independent of the apparatus of symbolization, of cogitation and speech. What Diotima touches on is the technique of life that works primarily as a technology of salvation, overshadowing the sincerity of love and altruistic self-sacrifice on the side of the human and the power of instinct and evolutionary developments on the side of the other-than-human.

The allegory of the phoenix contains, in a nutshell, the mechanics and machinations of reproduction and replacement: it is a handy rhetorical device (another instance of *mechanē*) demonstrating how a part of nature and life stands in for the whole and how each part is, like the whole, infinitely renewable. We are now in a better position to understand the avowed contradictions in the works of Tertullian and Lactantius, the former writing

that the new phoenix is “another, yet the same [*alius idem*]” (*De carnis resurrectione* 13.9), the latter—that she is “the very one, yet not the one [*et ipsa, nec ipsa est*]” (*De ave phoenice* 170). In line with the second machination, in which the other appears in the place of the same, the phoenix spans the extremes of otherness and sameness. Now, this second machination comes to light without the usual trappings and camouflages, because the first machination, replacing the desire for immortality with love, is absent. The phoenix does not need a sexual partner to reproduce; at most, his sexuality is dispersed among the elements: the warmth and the light of the sun, a thunderbolt, the rain and humidity, the vegetal matter of his nest. Nor does the bird ever meet her offspring, who may be deserving of maternal affection. Far from privative, the absence of love rarefies the veil of machinations, reducing two to one and revealing with greater clarity the mechanism of life’s reproducibility and (or as) replaceability.

The phoenix complex juggles sameness and otherness in a relation (without relation) forged across the fiery divide. As a result, reproductive activity does not engage with an original and its copy: these categories simply do not apply. Fourth-century Bishop of Verona, Zeno, makes the inapplicability of such aesthetic categories clear in the part of his *Tractatus* devoted to the phoenix: reborn, the phoenix is “not a shadow, but truth, not a likeness but the phoenix itself, not the other that, though better, is still the same as the one before it [*non umbra, sed veritas, non imago, sed phoenix, non alia, sed quamvis melior alia, tamen prior ipsa*]” (*Tractatus* 1.16.9). Zeno of Verona shuns the Platonic notion of ideas, corresponding to the original phoenix, and shadowy appearances that would be derivative from them in the bird’s subsequent incarnations. The mechanics of glorious rebirth, holding fresh machinations in store for us (the *machina ex deus* in place of the old *deus ex machina*), hinge on reproducibility without reproduction, an arising in truth, in the light and fire of truth, rather than as a photocopy of the lost original. In this unmediated relation between the same and the other, repetition plays the role of idealization, of maintaining intact the phoenix’s *essence*. The one coming after is actually better (*melior*) than—fresher, younger, filled with more vitality—but not an improvement over the predecessor, because it *essentially* remains the same.

In Diotima's speech, the preservation of mortals "not by remaining entirely the same forever" nevertheless presupposes the essential sameness of the reproducing and the reproduced. The genus and the genes are, each time anew, revived in the body of the newborn, who replaces the progenitors as yet another vessel, recipient, or carrier of what has been passed along in the process of reproduction. All significance resides in this deeply concealed essence with its phoenix-like capacities; the carriers are of little consequence by comparison.<sup>2</sup>

While it shares some markers of Platonic ideas, the genetic *eidos* is generative and self-regenerative (rather than ungenerated and entirely static), comprising as it does the ideal blueprint of a being that is the launchpad for actual existence. Letting go of one's own identity, becoming other in one's child, is something of an illusion, when reckoned from the vantage point of eidetic material that is passed on, from a gap between lives, the abyss of death.<sup>3</sup> It is in this sense that the other replaces the one—that is, the one replaces oneself with the other who is not essentially other—without anything either gained or lost, with nothing laudable or mournable. By putting love out of the equation (albeit not the kind of self-love that inheres in the desire for immortality), the phoenix complex and our contemporary nihilism foster the attitude of indifference toward the actual iterations of existence. What it is *not* indifferent toward is the iterability of being, the possibility of calling upon essence to clothe itself in flesh-and-blood once again.

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The phoenix is a synecdoche of nature; Prometheus is a prototype of technique or technology. There is, for all that and not just on account of the element of fire that unites them, something of the phoenix in Prometheus and something of Prometheus in the phoenix. Nature isn't altogether natural, inasmuch as it is filled with devices, machines and machinations, and, therefore, with technologies, say, of reproduction. In its turn, reproduction itself does not respect the nature/culture divide that is largely in our heads: it may be biological, social, or political, corporeal or spiritual, which is the thesis Diotima defends next. "Those who are pregnant in their souls [*psuchais kuousin*] even more than in their bodies, are pregnant with the kind

of offspring which it is fitting for the soul to conceive and to bear. What offspring are these? Discernment and the rest of virtues [*phronēsin te kai tēn allēn aretēn*]” (209a).

Cultural conception and spiritual pregnancy are not metaphoric inventions, as some commentators are apt to believe.<sup>4</sup> To make this argument is to miss the point. Though standing lower or higher on the steps of the ladder of love, those pregnant in the body and in the soul are subject to the same mechanics of a finite being transgressing its spatiotemporal boundaries and overflowing toward infinity by not keeping its self-identity, by generating another. Love (*eros*) is the name of this overflow. The one pregnant in the soul becomes other in the works, which include “a harmonious ordering of cities and households [*poleōn te kai oikēseōn diakosmēsis*]” (209a).<sup>5</sup> *Phronesis* (discernment) and the virtues share the soul’s DNA; the works have the eidetic makeup of the psyche. Becoming other in the works is not the moment of alienation that it is in much of modern philosophy. Rather, the works replace and reproduce (reproduce by replacing) the soul with its vision of beauty and the good.

The Platonic soul, too, is at least in part finite, which is why, to preserve itself, it must let go of itself, while leaving behind something or someone other and new after *its* kind. The *mechanē* of life itself functions in the body and in the psyche, with all the machinations and mechanisms of replication themselves replicated, redoubled, speculatively mirroring one another. In a shorthand, we might call these mechanics and machinations *two in one and one in two*.

When Socrates presents himself as the midwife of ideas in *Theaetetus*, he transforms himself into the medium of rebirth, occupying the structural spot of fire (or, at a slower pace, of fecund decomposition) in phoenix narratives. As he announces to his interlocutors that he is the son of a midwife, Phaenarete (the brightness, the phenomenality, the virtuous coming or bringing to light encrypted in this name cannot escape our attention), Socrates proclaims, in the case of yet another identification with a woman that taps into the sexual ambiguity of the phoenix, that he practices “the same art [*tēn autēn technēn*]” (*Theaetetus* 149a) as his mother. To the *mechanē* of life’s reproduction and replacement, we must now add the *technē* of its reception, of helping along what is languishing in obscure potentiality to reach the light



of day. More than this potential, however, Socrates stresses the intermediary between the one who gives birth and the birthed, the mediation that is inconspicuously there even when it seems that one is giving birth to oneself, all by oneself. Fire and a midwife are mediators, conduits from one state to another, and both are the representatives of death in life, of the emptying out, minimization, privation of properties, or reduction that is necessary to receive that which, or the one who, is about to be born in all its, her, or his singularity. There is no reproducibility and, or as, replaceability without such reception, which may, to be sure, get out of hand, the emptying out waxing absolute and inflecting with lethal indifference the mechanics of life, be it the life of the body or of the mind.

Centuries after Socrates, Zeno of Verona will contend that the phoenix's offspring is true, neither an image nor a shadow. Socrates' point, though, is that this truth needs to be ascertained in each event of birth: the definitive act of a midwife of ideas is "to discern between a true [offspring] and one that is not so [*to krinein to alēthes te kai mē*]," the latter being a mere "image offspring" (*eidōla tiktein*) (*Theaetetus* 150b). For, when it comes to reproduction, chances are that it would be of images—and not only in the sphere of cultural or psychic life. (Some parents wish more than anything to have children, who are their replicas, recognizable as the physical and behavioral images of themselves.) Provided that machinations are integral to the mechanism, which allows mortals to participate in immortality (in contemporary terms, we might say, "provided that machination is not a machine's bug, but its feature"), the substitutions they are responsible for produce one thing in the image or in the likeness of another. Love is the image of a desire for immortality, itself mediated through beauty that moves through images beyond the image; the other is the image of the same; bodily pregnancy is the image of the soul's reproductive activity, itself yielding either image or true offspring, and so forth. The self-showing of truth, ideally sheltered in the deep reserves of essence, is invariably an appearance, which doesn't preclude the possibility of it being a *mere* appearance.

Socrates views the totality of his philosophical practice as a gynecology of the soul, with a particular specialization in the arts of distinguishing between an image offspring and its true counterpart. That is his unique

*technē*. How do the arts of psychical gynecology tally with the mechanics of life? What is the relation between the Socratic *technē* and the *mechanē* of the finite participating in the infinite?

The Socratic examination of the offspring draws a circle in speech: “We must, in truth, perform the rite of *amphidromia*, going around the offspring in the circle of our speech [*meta de ton tokon ta amphidromia autou os alēthōs en kuklō perithrekteon tō logō*]” (*Theaetetus* 160e). *Amphidromia* is, in fact, a ceremony of socially acknowledging and legitimizing the newborn, “a ‘walking around’ or ‘running around’ the hearth, or around the child who lay in the hearth, which was the symbolic center of the *oikos* [the dwelling, MM].”<sup>6</sup> During the ceremony, the midwife also had to wash her hands, signaling that the period of pollution linked to childbirth had come to an end for her and for the child’s mother.<sup>7</sup>

When he circles the mind’s issue in speech, Socrates legitimizes (or not) the ideas (or the images) that have emerged with his assistance. The critical limits of his endeavor, embodied in this circle, signal that his *technē* can do no more than perform further machinations with the machinations built into the *mechanē* of a living (self-reproducing, self-replacing) life. Socrates ultimately verifies, as he moves around the offspring of the soul, that the circle of regeneration has been completed, that the soul has properly reproduced and replaced itself with the other appropriate to it, which is to say, with the same. But his ceremonial circle, like that in the original rite of *amphidromia*, also redraws the path of the phoenix’s self-reproduction, to the extent that its center is the hearth and the fire burning there, temporarily replaced, in a ceremonial setting, with the body of the newborn or with the offspring of the soul. A conservative dynamic, where roles and functions were kept constant in the procession of those who occupied them, the renewal of the household with each subsequent generation—the son or the daughter becoming the father or the mother of their daughter or son, as though nothing has changed—replayed the spectacle of the phoenix arising from the ashes. The rejuvenation of *logos*, which encircles an examined idea or image offspring, is homologous with the renewal of the *oikos*.

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The phoenix is a household and a soul, a body and an order of ideas; writ large, it is also the cosmos in Plato's constellation of texts and, above all, in *Timaeus*. Akin to the phoenix, the cosmos is unique, one of a kind (*monōsin*) (*Timaeus* 31b). It is, moreover, a unique "living being, ensouled and enreasoned [*kosmon zōon empsuchon ennoun*]" (*Timaeus* 30b). A cosmic animal or a cosmic plant, if you will. As such, this living being is "the most beautiful" and "the most perfect," "holding and embracing [*perilabon*] in itself all intelligible living beings" (*Timaeus* 30c). The cosmic phoenix, the phoenix as cosmos, is universal in its singularity and singular in its universality: it embraces in itself all life irrespective of division into kinds and species, while relying on the synecdochic power of *zōon* (a living being).

Egyptian influences, overtly mentioned in *Timaeus*, make it highly likely that, in the shape of *bennu*, the phoenix and her paraphernalia made their way into the Platonic dialogue. In the prefatory part of the text, Critias conveys that the source of cosmological speculations was Solon, who, in turn, imported them to Greece from the district of Sais in the Nile Delta (*Timaeus* 21e). Further, this dialogue includes the first mention of the astronomical interval known as the Sothic period in classical Greece, or the Egyptian Great Year amounting to 1,461 solar years. The noteworthiness of this ostensibly marginal fact is that the Egyptian Great Year is one of the presumed life spans of the phoenix, marking the beginning and the end of a cosmic cycle.<sup>8</sup> Finally, fire is front and center in *Timaeus*, both as the means of humanity's destruction and as the medium of its rejuvenation.

As his Egyptian interlocutor—an elderly priest from the city of Sais—tells Solon, throughout its history humanity has suffered "many and diverse destructions, the greatest of which are by fire and water [*puri men kai hudati megistai*]" (*Timaeus* 22c). These periodic destructions, however, are not total: whatever is left of civilization persists in the absence of written records and collective memory that lend a culture its age. The strange effect of fiery and watery devastation is the rejuvenation of the survivors. Speaking of and to the Greeks, the Egyptian priest says, "You are young in soul, every one of you [*Neoi este, eipein, tas psuchas pantes*]. For, in your soul, you possess not a single belief that is ancient and derived from old tradition, nor one science that is hoary with age" (*Timaeus* 22b-c). It is unclear how Egyptians managed

to escape the fate of the rest of humanity and, in this case, of Greece. What is obvious, though, is that renewal and rejuvenation, repeatedly reproducing the psyche as a clean slate, follow the model of a phoenix reborn, young and essentially unchanged, from the ashes of destruction.<sup>9</sup>

The mythic stand-in for the phoenix in the anecdote narrated by the Egyptian priest is Phaethon, the son of Helios, the sun god. After receiving for but a single day the right to drive his father's chariot, Phaethon, unable to control it, crashed into the earth, "burnt up all that was upon the earth and himself perished by a thunderbolt." "That story," the priest continues, "has the fashion of a legend [*muthou*], but the truth of it lies in the occurrence of a shifting [*parallaxis*] of the bodies in the heavens, which move round the earth, and a destruction of all things on the earth by great fire, which recurs at long intervals [*dia makrōn chronōn gignomenē tōn epi gēs puri pollō phthora*]" (*Timaeus* 22c-d). The long intervals at which periodic destruction and renewal recur refer to the epochal changes, accompanied by the appearance, death, and rebirth of the phoenix.<sup>10</sup> Mixing cosmic and political events, the completion of astronomic cycles and of pharaonic or imperial reigns, the phoenix simultaneously symbolizes decline and the ascension that follows it.

But the phoenix (or its mythical substitutes) is not limited to the beginnings and ends of great cycles; rather, the phoenix is a specific condensation of cosmic fire—of cosmos *as* fire. The Chinese counterpart of the Egyptian phoenix, the *fenghuang* bird,<sup>11</sup> is said to have "illuminated the heavens with its flight, producing the luminous Milky Way."<sup>12</sup> The flickering of the cosmic blaze, its "kindling in measures and going out in measures," in the words of Heraclitus, betokens the periodicity of its everlasting life (*aeizōon*) made up of distinct phases. The qualification of the cosmos in *Timaeus* as *zōon empsychon* (an ensouled creature) thus blends together fire, a living being, and the world.

The rhythmic brightening and dimming of cosmic fire signal the birth, life, death, and rebirth of the cosmic animal or plant. When *Timaeus* picks up the narrative thread from Critias, he rehashes the main traits of this animal or plant with greater precision in 32d–33a. This portrait consists of three crucial elements. First, the cosmic creature is "perfect and all its parts are perfect [*zōon teleon ek teleōn tōn merōn ein*]." The perfection of the

phoenix is a mainstay of virtually all classical and early Christian accounts. Likewise, the Great Year (not necessarily coinciding with the Sothic period), which is often thought of as the phoenix's life span, is "a perfect number [*periodos . . . teleios*]" (*Republic* 546b).<sup>13</sup> The perfection of the whole and its parts means that all the living beings who constitute the cosmic living being are, themselves, perfect as its constituents. The part-whole relation forged in a synecdoche still holds. Second, *zōon empsuchon* is "one [*hen*], such that there is nothing left behind out of which another similar being could come into existence." The uniqueness of the phoenix, who is peerless in the world, is blown up to cosmic proportions, assuming the form of a totality. Cosmic fire and life are not only perfect and unique but also all-embracing and exhaustive, comprehending all without a remainder. The third feature of the cosmic living being is that it is "not prone to ageing and unailing [*agērōn kai anoson*]." This is where divergences from the myth of the phoenix are at their starkest.

Another way of formulating the third characteristic of *zōon empsuchon* is that it is exempt from the order of time and material decay. Despite the phoenix's aging and weakening at the end of its life cycle, the dominant variants of the myth, moved by impatience with time and disgust with decomposition, dissimulate these phenomena. With instantaneous resurrection, it seems that death did not occur, that nothing changed from one incarnation of the phoenix to the next, that time did not pass, and that life in its continuity was not disrupted. Even those versions of the myth that depict a slow emergence of the young phoenix from the decaying remains of its predecessor put an accent on the identity of the two. When the process of renewal concludes, the changes and metamorphoses that took place along the way are no longer visible and are deemed insubstantial compared to triumphal self-regeneration.

Something that happens, is granted as happening, and is treated as though it has never happened is subject to the psychological (defense) strategy of disavowal, which we have already come across. But there is more to the phoenix complex than disavowal: the noncoincidence between the third feature of the Platonic cosmos and the mythic bird indicates that the phoenix is in an ambiguous position between finite beings, who have the imperfect

*mechanē* of participation in the infinite at their disposal, and the imperturbable nature of eternal divine vitality. This ambiguity must have appealed to early Christian thinkers, who saw in the phoenix a prototype of Christ, himself slotted between human and divine natures, or, in a word, *theandric*.

A different facet of the cosmic *zōon empsuchon* makes it fall short of the freshly generated phoenix, who is not a copy but a true original, as Zeno of Verona argues and as, before him, Socrates hopefully affirms about the child brought into the world on his watch by a pregnant soul. Timaeus conveys that the “cosmos is a copy of something [*kosmon eikona tinos einai*]” and that, moreover, it is a copy of a model (*paradeigma*) envisioned in advance of its actual production (*Timaeus* 29b). In other words, the production of the cosmos, the engendering of a perfect, unique, total, and incorruptible living being, is already a reproduction of the original that is only accessible by inferring it from the image or likeness (*eikona*) at hand. The logic of *mechanē* with its inextricably bound senses of mechanics and machinations returns with a vengeance.<sup>14</sup>

The cosmos need not reproduce itself because of its stable and unitary nature. *And* it does nothing but reproduce, from its very inception, a model for the life within it. The cosmos is, thus, an intermediary between the paradigm of life and the living who are part of it. Although the enormous fiery animal or plant that is the cosmos is unaging and unailing, in the logical chronology of its generation as the likeness of a previously defined paradigm it is both older and younger than itself, coming a distant second to demiurgic design.

Fire, life, and the world are so many reflections, iconic images of the thought that initially envisioned their look, their *eidōs*. As a result, the perfection of cosmic *zōon empsuchon* is put in question by the very ideal of perfection it is meant to embody. The periodic destructions of humanity by water and fire and its phoenix-like regeneration, which the Egyptian priest invokes in the beginning of the dialogue, reenact the simultaneous youth and agedness of the world. Egypt occupies the historical and conceptual place of old age vis-à-vis Greece that is incorrigibly young in its soul; in addition to coming first, compared to Greece, within the historical chronology of “great civilizations,” Egypt serves as the paradigm, a conceptual model for being

Greek, implemented afresh and unbeknownst to the Greeks themselves in every instance of their rejuvenation.

For the Greek world, for the cultural cosmos of the Hellenic civilization, Egypt is the idea formed prior to its actual production or reproduction. But, beginning with Rome, it was ancient Greek culture that was allotted the role of a model for the subsequent development of Western civilization. A copy became the original. Similarly, in relation to the living beings it comprises, the cosmos undergoes a veritable paradigm shift: an image (*eikona*) of the world as it is drafted in divine ideation (*paradeigma*). In addition, it is also a model for creatures created in its image. “Accordingly,” says Timaeus, “seeing that that model [*paradeigma*] is the eternal living creature, he [the demiurge; “the father”: *patēr*] set about making this universe, so far as he could, of a like kind” (*Timaeus* 37c-d). But divine intention hits a snag: the creatures of the world are not eternal (*aiōnios*), in contrast to the creature that is the world. Given that “this quality [made] it . . . impossible to attach in its entirety to what is generated, he contrived to make a moving image of eternity [*epinoei kinēton tina aiōnos poiēsai*]” (*Timaeus* 37d).

The “original” contrivance operative in the making (*poiēsis*) of life will be later on replicated in life’s mechanics and machinations. It, too, involves a substitution of paradigmatic eternity for its image, of immovable reality for its moving imitation.<sup>15</sup> The moving image of eternity is time, itself expressed through “an eternal image [*aiōnion eikona*]” that is number (*arithmon*) (*Timaeus* 37d). The doubling of eternity is matched by the doubling of images, each bolstering and undermining the other. The contrivance at work in the production of life (which is, from the get-go, life’s reproduction) passes, in this way, into the mechanics and machinations of self-regeneration. What is this contrivance’s bearing on the phoenix complex?

In the best-known renditions of the phoenix, the preponderate, barely concealed, gnostic or nihilistic sentiments are impatience and disgust taken to the extreme: impatience with time and disgust with matter. My hypothesis is that, with its fiery death-birth, the phoenix momentarily exits the order of time and returns, rejuvenated, thanks to this egress. The phoenix complex aims to recover the paradigm of the world prior to its depiction in an image, albeit by *intensifying* the logic of the image, by compressing the

fiery and eternal being of the world in a singular mythic, emblematic, iconic image. This is why the mythology of the phoenix morphs into a complex—a paradigm or a model of relating to the world and to ourselves with the same perennial fears and hopes, sentiments and objectives, as those implanted in the storying of this wonderous creature.

If the phoenix complex contemplates a leap to the state of being prior to the order of time, then, given the entwinement of impatience with disgust in the renowned versions of the myth, the same resolve must apply to matter as well. We ought to remember that a philosophical concept of matter is still absent in Plato; it will not be formulated until Aristotle's reinterpretation of *hulē*, the Greek word for wood and for the woods. Nevertheless, coming into existence, or being born (*genomenon*), according to *Timaeus*, is coming to visibility and to tangibility, becoming open to the senses of vision and touch. The material prerequisites for the becoming of whatever or whoever is born are fire and the earth, responsible for each of the two sensory aspects of a new emergence, respectively, "Drawing the beginning of all from a composite of fire and the earth [*ek puros kai gēs*], god made a body" (*Timaeus* 31b). Lending itself to and opening up the sense and the field of vision, fire is spiritual matter. Available to and inaugurating haptic sense, earth is material matter. Jointly, they anticipate the dance of the spirit of matter and the matter of spirit in Lactantius and Augustine. The composite of both fire and earth is a body, which likewise requires two intermediaries (*mesotēs*) to attain depth, balance, and synergic arrangement, namely water and air (*Timaeus* 32b). This precociously developed elemental dialectic is a prototheory of matter, explaining the production (or reproduction) of cosmic *zōon empsuchon*.

The phoenix's death and birth in fire counters the synthetic cosmogony, which Plato summarizes in the dialogue. There is no dialectic in this event, no synergies of elements, no mediation between the same and the other, birth and death. Which is to say that there is no air and very little water. The spectacle of the phoenix's consumption by and rejuvenation in the flames engages only the sense of vision; indeed, this spectacle is so spectacular that it augurs momentous events, like the birth of Christ, announced, in keeping with certain apocryphal texts, by the appearance of the phoenix on the roof of the temple in Jerusalem.<sup>16</sup> For Plato, a fiery constitution is the prerogative



of divinity, of celestial bodies, such as the stars: “As regard the divine kind, it is made for the most part of fire [*pleistēn idean ek puros*], so that it would have the look [*idein*] of utmost brilliance and beauty” (*Timaieus* 40a). Divine celestial bodies are not pure spirits; they are spiritual matter, the “that out of which” (*ek*) of making nearly overlapping with the look or the idea (*eidos*) of what is made and how. This unbearably bright and beautiful region of being is the one the phoenix inhabits, if only for an instant, in its fiery transformation. There, matter with its earthiness and tangibility is reduced, physically broken down by the flames, and metaphysically bracketed, dropped from the formula of existence. In the grave or the cradle that is its nest, the phoenix gains a new lease on life because it (willingly) dies to the world of matter.

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To recap, the “third path” of philosophically universalizing the singular has taken us to the *mechanē* of life’s reproduction and the *technē* of its knowledge and evaluation. The making of life, its *poiēsis*, harks from philosophy back to mythology, but, insofar as it is philosophically legible, production is already reproduction, with the “technical” aspect—the art of interpretation—doubling as an overarching principle of both *poiēsis* and *mechanē*.

Along the third path we have trodden thus far, the danger of the phoenix complex has shown itself to us in high-resolution images of thought. The phoenix’s enlivening flight from time and from matter traverses temporal and material reality. In philosophical jargon, this is the movement of transcendence in immanence. Transformation in fire contracts to a point, a flash, evincing unfathomable acceleration, compared to the much slower metamorphoses of decay narrated in the lesser-known variants of the myth. Combustion reduces matter to ash. And yet, time and matter are not entirely done away with: acceleration is the speeding up of time sequences, while combustion is a material process of rapid oxidation. So, we are not just dealing with an otherworldly tale that has been told since Egyptian, Chinese, Greek, and Latin antiquities and that we keep telling ourselves, usually without knowing what we are doing. Despite the mythical provenance of the phoenix, this unique creature illuminates *this* world and ourselves, to say nothing of our relation to the world and to ourselves. The many, often

cacophonous, voices that have narrated the story of the phoenix, occasionally even neglecting to mention her by name, join in a chorus when it comes to swearing by the infinity of the finite, the overcoming of the world in the world, of matter in matter, of time in time.

The problem of transcendence within immanence is one of the overarching themes in the philosophy of Jewish French twentieth-century thinker, Emmanuel Levinas.<sup>17</sup> Although his name has become nearly synonymous with the ethics of alterity, couched in terms of the asymmetrical relation of the I to the other, Levinas has a fair bit to say on the mechanics of life's reproduction, in light of which this relation itself appears drastically altered. His magnum opus, *Totality and Infinity*, moves back in its conclusion from the ethical philosophy of an encounter with the other who is a stranger to a philosophy of biological reproduction, of fecundity that ensures the infinity of finite time.<sup>18</sup> Levinas describes "total transcendence" as "the transcendence of trans-substantiation," where "the I is, in the child, an other [*le moi est, dans l'enfant, un autre*]."<sup>19</sup> Bracketing the Eucharistic overtones of transubstantiation, the odd mechanics of such transcendence is that the I is, or becomes, the other, bridging a gap that is otherwise unbridgeable in all of Levinas's philosophy. It is the manner of this becoming other that should occupy us here, even as it brings back to mind the main turning points in the phoenix narratives.

The instability of terms in the relation of paternity (we will have something to say on the subject of gendering this relation in a moment) that is concretized in fecundity gives us the first telltale sign of a carryover from the phoenix complex. "The diverse forms Proteus assumes do not liberate him from his identity," Levinas writes. "In fecundity the tedium of this repetition ceases; the I is other and young [*le moi est autre et jeune*], yet ipseity that ascribed to it its meaning and its orientation in being is not lost in this renouncement of self. Fecundity continues history without producing old age."<sup>20</sup> The words of Tertullian and Lactantius resonate in this discussion of how ipseity is preserved in the other, in the son who is and is not the father; the phoenix's offspring, too, is "another, yet the same" (*De carnis resurrectione* 13.8–9) and "the same indeed, but not the same [*ipsa quidem, sed non eadem*]" (*De ave phoenice* 169). Even the Latin-derived ipseity (the French

*ipséité*) literally echoes the Latin authors who grappled with the figure of the phoenix.

Another sign that Levinas's thoughts on fecundity fall within the purview of the phoenix complex is his treatment of death as a mere interval, punctuating the ever-recommencing chain of infinite time or infinite being. "Infinite being is produced as times, that is, in several times across the dead time that separates the father from the son [*à travers le temps mort qui sépare le père du fils*]. . . . The nothingness of the interval—a dead time—is the production of infinity [*Le néant de l'intervalle—un temps mort—est la production de l'infini*]. Resurrection constitutes the principal event of time."<sup>21</sup>

Rather than finitude and death, the negation of death in resurrection, the infinite surpassing of dead time, makes time what it is. Death itself is a hiccup in the temporal order, its nothingness opening up an interval across which the self-regenerative movement of generations resumes. Replacing fire with death, or, more precisely, with dead time, Levinas unintentionally takes a page from Claudian's book, especially the latter's phrase, "The adjoining twinned lives are separated in the exact middle by a burning fire [*geminae confinia vitae exiguo medius discrimine separat ignis*]" (*Carmina minora* 27.70–71). Separation unites (as opposed to the "absolute separation" between the I and the other, with which *Totality and Infinity* commences), not interfering with but actually strengthening the adjoining arrangement of the father's and the son's lives. The interval is necessary—if not to the success then to the very possibility of a leap across the dead time that stretches between the two. It is there to delimit times, to outline the ends and the beginnings of eras or generations, and, consequently, to be overcome.

Stubborn insistence on the *production* of infinite being or time in Levinas takes us back to the mechanics of life and the technologies of salvation. As we have come to expect, this production is already a reproduction, flowing from father to son. Wedged in the middle, dead time is the nonreproducible precondition for reproduction, a discontinuous threshold or verge for a phoenix-like resurgence in existence. Thus, Levinas writes, "A being capable of another fate than its own is a fecund being. In paternity, where the I, across the definitiveness of an inevitable death, prolongs itself in the other [*se prolonge dans l'Autre*], time triumphs over old age and fate by its

discontinuity.”<sup>22</sup> A secular salvation, the triumph of time is the cunning of letting go of oneself in order to recover something of oneself in the other. The discontinuity, the rupturing of time, the rupturing that *is* time, ensures the prolongation of what inevitably draws to its end. The mechanics and machinations of life converge, spilling out into salvific technologies.

The term *production*, peppering these pages of *Totality and Infinity*, may make us wonder, with an eye to the Platonic corpus, which model, which paradigm, is operative in envisioning that which or the one who will be produced and how.

On the one hand, the paradigm in question is obviously biological but also economic, in lieu of Levinas’s habitual ethical model. Not so much because of the reproductive exchange of the father for the son, who represents interest on the investment that prolongs or extends the finite time of paternal life, but because life’s mechanics and machinations pertain to the domain of substance, in which the I is a kind or a mode (*espèce*): “To be infinitely means to be produced in the mode of an I that is always at the origin [*se produire sous les espèce d’un moi qui est toujours à l’origine*], but that meets with no trammels of the renewal of its substance, not even from its very identity.”<sup>23</sup> Substantiation and transubstantiation are immanence and immanent transcendence that belong within the circle or the circulation of the economy of the same. The smooth production and reproduction of the I “that meets with no trammels” in its renewal also corroborate this economic construction.

On the other hand, while also drawing on the logic (or at least on the discourse) of production, the paradigm of fecundity implies a desaturation of power and control: “Infinite being, that is ever-recommencing being—which could not bypass subjectivity, for it could not recommence without it—is produced in the guise of fecundity [*se produit sous les espèces de la fécondité*]. . . . The relation with the child—that is, the relation with the other that is not a power, but fecundity—establishes relationship with the absolute future, or infinite time.”<sup>24</sup> A recommitment to subjectivity uncoupled from an identity dilutes the thick substantivism of renewal, which was so blatant in the economic paradigm. We, therefore, need to distinguish, in keeping with a fine filament of Levinas’s text, the incessant replaying of

a substantive origin, including substance's unique mode that is the I, from the ever-recommencing world of a subject. The structure of transcendence in immanence cannot help but lead to a clash between these two paradigms, veiled over by the language of production.

Yet another trace of the phoenix complex in Levinas's thought is the erasure of sexual difference in the engendering of a child, in whom the progenitor is transubstantiated. The transcendence and multiplicity that are there in existence itself are such that in fecundity "I am not swept away, because the son is not me; and yet I *am* my son [*le moi ne s'empporte pas, puisque le fils n'est pas moi; et cependant je suis mon fils*]."<sup>25</sup> Lactantius is, once again, glancing at us through the lines written by Levinas: the phoenix in *De ave phoenice* is "its own father and its heirs [*suus est pater et suus haeres*]" (167). It might be possible to explain the perspective on fecundity as paternity by the phenomenological bent of the text, whose author is a male philosopher working out of his experience.<sup>26</sup> But what happens when the "transubstantiated" I of the father is a daughter, or, vice versa, when that of a mother is a son? Then other kinds of complexes, which Freud enunciates, are in order.<sup>27</sup> Most important, the phoenix's recovery of identity across the abyss of death depends on the fact that the phoenix is either sexless or produces an offspring of the same sex. For all the inexhaustible and nontotalizable multiplicity in existence that, following Levinas, does not obey the laws of Eleatic unity, and for all the ambiguity of love he gives prominence to, the offspring is an emanation of the one (the I), instead of being the third who emerges from a relation between two. The child other is, in other words, the I othered *and* another progenitor also othered, leading to an inconsistent transubstantiation, at least when the social setting for reproduction is a heterosexual family or when the gender of the child does not coincide with that of a parent.

Finally, like the phoenix, the father and the son interlaced by the ties of fecundity are unique. "To be one's son means to be I in one's son, to be substantially in him [*être moi dans son fils, être substantiellement dans lui*], yet without being maintained there in identity. . . . The son resumes the unicity of the father [*l'unicité du père*] and yet remains exterior to the father: the son is a unique son [*fils unique*]. Not by number; each son of the father is the unique son, the chosen son."<sup>28</sup> Transubstantiation is thereby revealed

as synonymous with the consubstantiality of the parent and the child: the father is in the son as substance, though not as subject, unless—and this proviso is highly significant for Levinas—subjectivity means something other than the maintenance of a self in its identity.

The uniqueness of the phoenix in classical and early Christian corpus (notably, in Lactantius, Ambrose, and Isidore of Seville) was our point of departure, as was the arduous task of reconciling without the assistance of dialectical techniques the movement of substitution with the uniqueness (the nonsubstitutability) of the being primed for substitution. Levinas's work revisits this point of departure under the heading of personal transcendence, in which the I is preserved, substantively if not subjectively, in contrast to the ancient "terrors, whereby the transcendence of the sacred, inhuman, anonymous, and neuter menaces persons with nothingness or with ecstasy [*menace les personnes de néant ou d'extase*]."29 For their part, these "ancient terrors" go to the root of the phoenix-nature that is reborn, primordially, in the anonymity of impersonal existence. The myth of the phoenix is a fledgling attempt to put a face—a mythical face, but a face nonetheless—on this force. Yet, nothingness and ecstasy do not go anywhere; they do not disappear, staying instead behind the mask that is the face. Uniqueness makes sense only against the general backdrop of the neuter and the void.

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It would not be an exaggeration to say that the thought of Levinas bears the stamp of the phoenix. We have studied some of this stamp's impressions in his approach to biological reproduction, but his theory of subjectivity is not free from them either. Still within the paradigm of production, "in the mode of an I, being can be produced as infinitely recommencing [*sous les espèces du Moi, l'être peut se produire comme infiniment recommençant*], that is, properly speaking, as infinite."<sup>30</sup> In the mode of an I, then, the subject is a phoenix, produced as infinitely reproducing. For whatever reason, Alphonso Lingis, the English translator of *Totality and Infinity*, omits the words "*sous les espèces du*" (in the mode of) and writes "in the I." Nonetheless, it is just this mode of being that accommodates the production and infinite reproduction of the being who says *I*, occasioning a conflation of the most intimate,

the most unique, and the most generally abstract. According to Hegel, the indifferent welcome the word *I* gives to whomever utters it is the abstract beginning of phenomenology, in which the singular and the universal are as yet unmediated through their mutual self-negation. In this phase of the dialectic, the mode of an *I* is one where, in the guise of multifaceted diversity, nothing changes; where substitutions of the unique are inattentive to who or what is being substituted; where the same and the other are formally interchangeable.

In Levinas's later work, *Otherwise Than Being*, substitution is the dynamic structure of subjectivity, rather than an act *a posteriori* initiated by the subject. "Substitution," Levinas notes there, is "the very subjectivity of a subject [*substitution comme subjectivité même du sujet*], interruption of the irreversible identity of the essence."<sup>31</sup> It is the mechanism and the machination of subject production, that through which, in the mode of an *I*, being is infinitely recommencing. Substitution is the moment of transcendence inculcated into the subject's subjectivity: to be a subject, for Levinas, is to be self-transcending toward the other, that is to say, to be capable of substituting oneself for the other.

Yet, substitution is not an escape route, a way of evading responsibility by getting out of the skin of the *I* who could be held to account (Levinas's early and relatively understudied essay is titled *On Evasion*<sup>32</sup>; the responsibility and the urgency of responding to the other are variations on the theme of *t'shuvah*—repentance, return, and response, all wrapped in one word). The transcendent vector of substitution is embedded in the immanence of uniqueness, in the sense that no one else is in a position to step in and do for the other what *I* must do for her: "Here uniqueness means the impossibility of slipping away and being replaced, in which the very recurrence of the *I* is effected [*se dérober et de se faire remplacer, dans laquelle se noue la récurrence même du je*]."<sup>33</sup> Substitution is not replacement, in which the uniqueness of both the replacing and the replaced would be nullified.<sup>34</sup> Perhaps, this is the gist of the self-contradictory affirmation that the reborn phoenix is simultaneously the same as and other to its predecessor.

If substitution is the matrix of subjectivity, then the phoenix complex accounts not only for intergenerational biological or social renewal and

extension of finite existence beyond its limit, but also for psychic regeneration. In each instant, the subject is reborn in its memories and inspirations, anticipations and experiences, while many other memories and so forth remain dormant—forever or until another moment of rebirth. Every time I recur in these forms of psychic life, the same as and different from the previous version of me.

“Do the being encumbered with oneself and the suffering of constriction in one’s skin, better than metaphors, follow the exact trope of an alteration of essence, which inverts, or would invert, into a recurrence in which the expulsion of self outside of itself is its substitution for the other?” Levinas asks. “Is not that what the self emptying itself of itself would really mean? This recurrence would be the ultimate secret of the incarnation of the subject [*Réurrence qui serait l’ultime secret de l’incarnation du sujet*].”<sup>35</sup> The self perpetually dying and reborn, “emptying itself of itself” and, across the ensuing void, substituting for the other is the phoenix-subject, the subject as phoenix. Recurrence routinizes reproductive mechanics and machinations of the subject as much as of substance. Transubstantiation dovetails in Levinas’s thought with transsubjectivation.

Shuttling between the philosophy of nature, latent in the notion of fecundity, and a philosophy of subjectivity allows us to examine Levinas’s project from an uncommon angle. The phoenix as the paradigm of the subject is *either* extrapolated from the world of nature *or* it is a mode of subjectivity equally at work in nonhuman nature. Substitution and signification (indeed, substitution qua signification) do not require any utterance on the part of the subject. Recommencement in the mode of an I is but a limitrophe case of recurrence that is not pervaded by anonymous, neuter, and terrifying powers of impersonal transcendence but that befits the subject’s “uniqueness without identity [*unicité sans identité*].”<sup>36</sup> To say, as Levinas does, that recurrence is “the ultimate secret of the incarnation of the subject” is to undersign the vegetal, animal, and altogether unclassifiable incarnations of the phoenix, who stands for the whole of nature, precisely as subject. And it is to shift the decidedly modern discourse of the production and reproduction of life, which animates the closing chapters of *Totality and Infinity*, onto a more ancient terrain of life’s incarnation and reincarnation.



Admittedly, the Levinasian subject is not reducible to life: its emptying out, the voiding of self, dying (in saying *I* as well as in becoming a progenitor) point in a direction that is the opposite of life. But the emptying, voiding, and passing are in life, and they are activated for the sake of life and its continuation beyond the limits of its finitude. This is what transcendence in immanence means, occasioning at the same time various tensions and torsions in the tissue of Levinas's texts. Next, I gloss on the most salient among these and their connection to the phoenix complex.

Whereas in *Totality and Infinity* Levinas praised fecundity for its marvelous gift of "continu[ing] history without producing old age," in *Otherwise Than Being* "subjectivity in ageing is unique, irreplaceable, me and not another [*la subjectivité dans le vieillissement est unique, irremplaçable, moi et pas un autre*]."<sup>37</sup> The wrinkles on our skin or tree rings that spatially articulate the aging of a plant are the marks of an irreplaceable being, as much as of a subject constituted by substitution before its beginning and after its end. Further, the fast transubstantiating and transsubjectivating leap of paternity is moderated, in the later work, by patience, lingering, awaiting, that are not all that different from aging: "The temporalization prior to the verb, or in a verb without a subject, or in the patience of a subject that lies as it were on the underside of the active ego, is the patience of ageing [*la patience du vieillissement*]."<sup>38</sup> Rather than the other of the phoenix, it is another phoenix who manifests herself in these lines, where patience, forbearance, the witnessing of a slow transformation "on the underside of the active ego" do not strive to wipe out time and matter within temporal and material reality. All these are traces of immanent resistance to the phoenix complex already present in the complex itself and, in a more literary vein, in the alternative mythical accounts of the phoenix's death and resurrection. The difference between the two mythical traditions may be, therefore, transposed onto the divergences between the paradigms we find in Levinas's *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise Than Being*.

The thorny issue of nature "itself" is another piece of the puzzle that is transcendence within immanence, now honed by a difficult relation of subjectivity to life. At times, Levinas understands nature in the classical sense as natality, or birthing. In this line of thinking he writes, "Rather

than nature, earlier than a nature [*Plutôt que nature, plus tôt que la nature*], immediacy is this vulnerability, this maternity, this pre-birth or pre-nature [*cette pré-naissance ou pré-nature*] in which sensibility belongs.<sup>39</sup> Maternity, conceived following in the footsteps of Socrates as the subject carrying the other in itself, is assigned to the time of prebirth (hence of prenatalure), just as paternity has been designated for the time of postdeath (or postnature). Together, they complete the regenerative cycle of the phoenix, but the life in between the two is absent, because that is where mediations belong—in the middle that remains foreign to Levinas.

The immediacy of maternity that presumably precedes nature itself is contentious, above all on the terms of Levinas's philosophy: maternity is fullness and emptying out, a life and subjectivity, immanence and transcendence. In other words, maternity is already the middle, excluded from radical ethics and from formal logic alike. The grain of truth in the ascription of immediacy to maternity has to do with a lack of mediations within that sensibility which precedes consciousness and so resists the powers of representation.<sup>40</sup> Nature, not least in its synecdochic condensation in the phoenix, is immediate in this sense, which suggests that nature precedes nature: prenatalure is also nature.

Levinas himself notes as much in another section of *Otherwise Than Being*, and still in the context of maternity and the “absolute passivity” of being formed by the other—of not having one's origin in oneself: “This passivity is that of an attachment that has been already made, as something irreversibly past, prior to all memory and all recall. It was made in an irrecoverable time which the present, represented in recall, does not equal, in a time of birth or creation, of which nature or a creature retains a trace, unconvertible into a memory [*un temps de la naissance ou de la création dont nature ou créature garde une trace, inconvertible en souvenir*].”<sup>41</sup> Both other to and the same as itself, nature precedes itself in the manner of the phoenix, recoverable across the distance of death, dead time, or fire. Being born, however, is “irreversibly past,” “a trace, unconvertible into a memory,” everpresent like a trauma, the very site or nonsite for the emission of the ethical demand, the trace or the face of the other: “A face can appear as a face, as a proximity interrupting the series, only if it enigmatically comes from the Infinite and

its immemorial past.”<sup>42</sup> So Levinas’s project of *ethics as first philosophy* does not exclude but, on the contrary, presupposes a philosophy of nature in the guise of the “time of birth,” irrecoverable by the consciousness of the one who is born.

Among the classical myths of the phoenix, some underscore the ethical impulse, interpreted in a traditional (indeed, the most traditional) terms of a desire to pay one’s last respects to the dead. This is the impulse that moved Antigone to disobey Creon and to bury her brother Polynices in violation of Creon’s edict. It is also the impulse that, in those renditions of the phoenix story where the mortal remains of the bird’s predecessor stay in the nest, prompts the young phoenix to gather the remains and carry them across the sea to perform burial rites with them back in Egypt. As we have seen in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, “When time has given the offspring sufficient powers [*cum dedit huic aetas vires*],” he transports the cradle-grave with its contents to “the city of Hyperion, where he will lay this heavy burden just before the sacred doors within the city temple” (15.403–407). The tradition goes back to Herodotus, according to whom, the phoenix’s offspring “flying from Arabia to the temple of the sun . . . conveys his father encased in myrrh and buries him at the temple of the sun” (*Histories* 2.73). With the phoenix–nature synecdoche in mind, it is nature that is burying the past incarnations of itself or offering them on the altar of the sun—and, thus, creating fertile soil or fossils. In this way, nature both renews itself, physically and biochemically, *and* lays the ground for ethics before ethics, coming at us from the same direction as the immemorial, unrepresentable trace of the other and the injunction it conveys.

Levinas’s experiments with transcendence in immanence have led us to an odd place where biological reproduction and a theory of subjectivity, corresponding to philosophy of nature, and ethical thought, overlap. This overlap does not forge a totality, which would subsume multiple singularities within itself; it teases infinity out of finitude instead. At the same time, Levinas’s optimism with regard to the perennial recommencement of youth in fecundity is tempered with his acceptance of aging, patience, and passivity more passive than a mere opposite of activity. The two classical renditions of the phoenix complex come into focus in his work: the leap that voids time in

the substitution of one finite being with another (in fact, Levinas argues that this voiding of time's finitude bestows meaning on time) and a tarrying with the limited span of a life lived by an irreplaceable existent. These divergent perspectives reveal themselves as two sides of the same coin, in which life and subjectivity—"the vivacity of life" and the "event [of] . . . this permanent revolution" that is the ethical relation to the other—are "an excession, the rupture of the container by the uncontainable."<sup>43</sup> It is this excession and this rupture, in their sundry shapes and guises, that the phoenix complex thematizes in the image of life bubbling up and surpassing itself, its term, its limit defined in death.

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The phoenix's rebirth from the ashes is something Levinas dithers over (vacillating unconsciously—since he does not, at least to my knowledge, couch it in these terms) after the singular catastrophe called in Hebrew with the word *catastrophe*, the Shoah.

In his interpretation of the Talmudic tractate *Bava Kamma* (60a-b), "Damages Due to Fire," Levinas asks, "Does the ultimate reason of the violence of war sink into the abyss of an extermination coming from beyond war? Or does the madness of extermination retain a grain of reason?" And, Levinas adds, "that is the great ambiguity of Auschwitz [*la grande ambiguïté d'Auschwitz*]. That is the question. Our text does not resolve it [*ne la résout pas*]. It underlines it. Our text does not resolve it because the answer here would be indecent, as all theodicy probably is."<sup>44</sup> The ashes of Auschwitz do not hold the promise of redemption, of regeneration. The persistence of the light of reason—the twisted reason of a logic "coming from beyond war"—in the midst of the ashes is an open question, unresolved by "our text" and by "all theodicy." To answer this question in an attempt to resolve it is to contribute, however unwittingly, to the Final Solution. With a rebuke to all theodicy, including that of a rational or rationalist variety, Levinas spurns the view of the Jewish people as a phoenix reborn from the ashes of extermination camps. (Let it be mentioned here that the phoenix is not foreign to the Jewish tradition, either: as the bird *hol'*, it is present in the midrash *Bereshith Rabbah*, where it is said to be the only animal who refused to taste

the forbidden fruit along with Adam and Eve and who was, consequently, granted a long life, its days as numerous as *hol'*—the Hebrew for “sand.”<sup>45</sup>)

The technologies of salvation and the mechanics or machinations of life stop working in and in the aftermath of Auschwitz. Before, “the righteous could still hope that their death would save the world. But here they are, dying first, and the unjust perish with them. Holiness serves no purpose, then. . . . Useless sacrifice! [*Sacrifice inutile!*]<sup>46</sup> Useless sacrifice resonates with the title of a small essay by Levinas, “Useless Suffering,” the suffering undergone for nothing, totally meaningless. “It is the *impasse* of life and of being—their absurdity—in which pain does not just somehow innocently happen to ‘color’ consciousness with affectivity. The evil of pain, the deleterious per se, is the outburst and deepest expression, so to speak, of absurdity.”<sup>47</sup> There is no hope of self-recovery in the other across the void of useless suffering and useless sacrifice. Dead time and the fire burning in this void are all-consuming, with respect not only to the sentient flesh but also to reason that seeks justifications, cause-and-effect chains, and even to reason’s cunning that works behind our backs. There is, in the situation of useless suffering, neither a quick leap over the limits of finitude nor a gradual, patient transformation. If it brings life and being to an impasse, that is because both paths of the phoenix are blocked, and we lack the resources to deal with the meaning of being and life in any other way.

Despite Levinas’s contention that biological and psychological vitality are irredeemable—that they cannot be processed by the mechanisms of the phoenix complex after Auschwitz—and despite his denunciation of “all theodicy,” his approach to spiritual and political life is caught up in the phoenix complex. This discrepancy within Levinas’s thought is nothing short of dithering in the face of the ashes. His defense of Judaism is thoroughly phenomenological, in that it points to the still warm and burning animating impulse beneath layers of concealment and sedimentation. “Is this worm-eaten old Judaism to be preferred to the Judaism of the Jews? Well, why not? We don’t yet know which of the two is more lively [*le plus vivant*]. Are the true books just books? Or are they not also the embers still glowing beneath the ashes [*la braise qui dort sous la cendre*], as Rabbi Eliezer called the words of the Prophets? In this way the flame traverses history without burning

in it [*La flamme traverse ainsi l'histoire sans brûler en elle*]. But the truth illuminates whoever breathes on the flame and coaxes it back to life."<sup>48</sup> The question, however, is whether the phenomenological strategies of reanimation (if not resurrection), of reduction and desedimentation are still effective after Auschwitz—the proper name for the unsubstitutable loss, which is not available to sense-making and understanding.

In the spiritual history of Judaism, bodies of meaning retain their liveliness to the extent that they are irreducible to the actual books or texts containing them. Just as the vivacity of life and of subjectivity are predicated on the excession of excess, “the rupture of the container by the uncontainable,” so the sense of “old Judaism” breaks through the ashes of meaning as the embers still glowing underneath it. The phoenix effect of this slow-burning fire is its reanimation by “whoever breathes on the flame and coaxes it back to life.” As a matter of fact, the fire of spiritual life is not extinguished, its flare-ups and diminutions varying in the course of a history. And, along with the fire, the phoenixes are all those who interact with it, those whose breath fans the flames. Coaxing it back to life, they are themselves revived by it. As in the myth of the phoenix, spiritual fire is the elemental milieu of renewal, an interval between lives that is more alive than the incarnations it separates from one another. The entire millennia-long practice of Jewish exegesis is compacted in this image.

In an essay from the same collection, Levinas aligns the political history of Zionism with the spiritual history of Judaism. Having apparently forgotten the “indecent of theodicy” confronted with Auschwitz, he writes the following in “Space Is Not One-Dimensional”: “The Nazi persecution and, following the exterminations, the extraordinary fulfilment of the Zionist dream are religious events [*des événements religieux*] outside any revelation, church, clergy, miracle, dogma, or belief.”<sup>49</sup> In this spiritual-political history, the State of Israel figures as a phoenix, undertaking a “daring task of recommencement [*cette audace de recommencement*]” after exterminations, after the mass burning of European Jewry in the Nazi gas chambers. Recommencement refers to the political (and, Levinas implies, the spiritual) rebirth of the Jewish people after the physical annihilation of millions of Jewish people. “The creation of the State of Israel was produced at this level [*se produisit à*

*ce niveau*],” Levinas continues. “It revived [*Il ressuscitait*] in 1948, scorning all sociological, political or historical improbability.”<sup>50</sup>

“At this level”: the level of spiritual history, distinguished from that of sociological, historical, and other probabilities. Spiritual revival, wrapped in the political form of the state, is the rebirth of a people from the physical ashes, into which actual lives and living bodies of people were turned. I fear that this is the “grain of reason” in the “madness of extermination,” according to the question Levinas formulates and, tactfully, leaves without an answer in “Damages Due to Fire.” Though useless and meaningless at the level of individual lives and biological existence as a whole, suffering is imbued with meaning at the spiritual-political level. The phoenix complex is simultaneously scrapped and bolstered, depending on the kinds of life—and death—that are sieved through fire and ashes.

And concepts? Do they renew themselves after they are thrown into the fire of history? The metaphysical concept, the very conceptuality of the concept in Western philosophy from Plato to Husserl, has been deemed immune to the forces of physical destruction. The concept’s indestructibility is not merely one among its traits, but an essential feature, setting it apart from extended reality. This changes in Levinas. In a paragraph contemplating “what happened in Europe between 1933 and 1945,” he writes: “There are events which burn up the concepts that express their substance [*Il existe des événements qui brûlent les concepts qui expriment leur substance*].”<sup>51</sup> What is the fate of these burned concepts? What, if anything, do they express? Do the incinerated concepts get a chance to undergo transubstantiation or transubjectivation across the fiery abyss of the event? Is this chance itself indexed to distinct “levels” of being—spiritual or biological, political or individual? What does a phoenix concept, neither metaphysically eternal nor destructible once and for all, look like?

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