#### 3. Believing in an escape through the “Black Hole” is cruelly optimistic.

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Levinas’s On Escape is less positive about the potential to be found in escape. Levinas gives us a glimpse of a phenomenology of riveted-ness and the urge to escape that condition. Levinas shows us how the condition of being riveted is not something that comes to us from without, but is a part of our very experience of being, and that any “escape” we may experience is fleeting and illusory. So even though Levinas discusses escape in terms stemming from Heidegger’s fundamental ontology, I argue that his diagnoses of the impulse to escape are equally applicable to the problem of social ontology, i.e. race. The point is not to shrug one’s shoulders and accept one’s status, but rather that the “way out” must be sought elsewhere, or, better yet, otherwise. I again refer to Jane Anna Gordon’s engagement with Roberts: “But while flight may be ubiquitous, I remain reluctant to treat it as a normative ideal.”363 There is no escape from being; according to Levinas, there is only being otherwise, that is, for-the-other.

This sentiment is echoed in Samuel R. Delany’s novella The Star Pit. Vyme and the ordinary (non-Golden) humans wrestle with being restricted to living in humanity’s home galaxy, whereas Golden are free to travel between galaxies at will. Only late in the novella does Vyme learn from An the Golden that even the “freest” are constrained, bound to this universe. And yet other beings which have been portrayed as the weakest and most limited in the story (the tiny, black sloth-like pets) are unbound by this universe, and yet simultaneously easily confined to terrariums. Even those who manage to escape are confined, albeit confined in different terms. Much like the marooned who flee spatially from the plantation, the Golden still find themselves bound up by this racialized universe, unable to surpass the practices, institutions, and relations that comprise the “dimension” of racialization.

Levinas’s On Escape

Levinas’s early essay On Escape attempts to get at the problem of being by way of untangling the problem of escape (as well as nausea, need, and pleasure). Though his name appears nowhere in the text itself, Heidegger’s conception of being as it is articulated in Being and Time lies at the center of Levinas’s essay. Levinas is struggling with the implications of Heideggerian Dasein (“being-there”) and Geworfenheit (“thrown-ness” esp. toward death). Mitsein (“being-with”) is less present but if one is familiar with Levinas’s later work, you can see the seeds of his thought as regards this concept as well.

Levinas wants to contest the ways that Western philosophy has heretofore addressed what he considers the central problem of philosophy, the problem of being. Levinas opens the essay with the following diagnosis, “The revolt of traditional philosophy against the idea of being originates in the discord between human freedom and the brutal fact of being that assaults this freedom.”364 He is diagnosing not only a problem of how we have philosophized to this point, but he also addresses the issue of being as an assault, an imposition, a thing forced upon us. It is this notion of being as the “there is,” the facticity of being, which will guide his interest in escape. By working backward from escape, he hopes to better theorize being. It is from the imposition of being, its neutrality and incontestability that we are compelled to escape.

Yet this category of sufficiency is conceived in the image of being such as things offer it to us. They are. Their essence and their properties can be imperfect; the very fact of being is placed beyond the distinction between the perfect and the imperfect. The brutality of its assertion [that of the fact of being] is absolutely sufficient and refers to nothing else. Being is: there is nothing to add to this assertion as long as we envision in being only its existence. This reference to oneself is precisely what one states when one speaks of the identity of being. Identity is not a property of being, and it could not consist in the resemblance of properties that, in themselves, suppose identity. Rather, it expresses the sufficiency of the fact of being, whose absolute and definitive character no one, it seems, could place in doubt.365

The original text of On Escape is but twenty-five pages, but its scope is daring. Levinas shifts between the topics of escape, need, malaise, pleasure, shame, to nausea—all in the effort to wrestle with the problem of being. In the first two sections, escape is explicitly at the center of Levinas’s working-through of the problem of being. These sections meander in typical Levinasian style, but clarity peaks through. Instead of the romanticized notion of escape as a “vital urge” driving us from “this worldly existence,” he argues for escape in a different sense:

With the vital urge we are going toward the unknown, but we are going somewhere, whereas with escape we aspire only to get out [sortir]. It is this category of getting out, assimilable neither to renovation nor to creation, that we must grasp in all its purity. It is an inimitable theme that invites us to get out of being. A quest for the way out, this is in no sense a nostalgia for death because death is not an exit, just as it is not a solution. The ground of this theme is constituted—if one will pardon the neologism—by the need for excendence. 366

This notion of escape is not a mere conquering of limitations or of achieving an essential possibility or a reaching of one’s fate, but rather a flight from being as an “imprisonment from which one must get out.”367 It is being in all of its granted-ness, its given-ness, its inflicted-ness, and ultimately its enchainment from which we need to escape. “Existence is an absolute that is asserted without reference to anything else. It is identity. […] In the identity of the I [moi], the identity of being reveals its nature as enchainment, for it appears in the form of suffering and invites us to escape. Thus, escape is the need to get out of oneself, that is, to break that most radical and unalterably binding of chains, the fact that the I [moi] is oneself [soi-même].368 It is important to realize that Levinas does not figure being as rejected in favor of an alternative like death, or non-being, but rather as something that must be framed and dealt with differently—not something to be rejected, but escaped. I must escape that I am me—the fact that I am myself and no one/nothing else. I am bound to being myself. “Escape, on the contrary, puts in question precisely this alleged peace-with-self, since it aspires to break the chains of the I to the self [du moi à soi]. It is being itself or the “one-self” from which escape flees, and in no wise being’s limitation.”369

This may seem nonsensical at first glance, but it is here that we must remind ourselves that even in his challenge to Heideggerian thought and frames of being, Levinas realizes that we can never go “back” to a pre-Heideggerian time, we can only be post-Heideggerian. Levinas does not think that Heidegger is “wrong” in the sense that his formulations of being are inconsistent, but rather that the implications of Dasein, Geworfenheit, and Mitsein are wrongheaded in that this model denies the centrality of the Other in being. Heidegger’s being is at best a “mitsein” (being-with) or even a “marching-alongside,”370 whereas Levinas spends his career attempting to theorize being in terms of a being-for-the-other. In other words, Levinas sees being in the former sense as something to be “escaped” in the sense of “getting out of being by a new path,” being “otherwise than being.” “It is a matter of getting out of being by a new path, at the risk of overturning certain notions that to common sense and the wisdom of the nations seemed the most evident.”371 Levinas does not know it at the time he wrote On Escape, but the early seeds of the infinite responsibility he articulates in Totality and Infinity (1961) and subsequently Otherwise than Being (1974)—these works articulate what it means to “get out by a new path,” that path is by, through, and for the Other. Through infinite responsibility for the Other in all their irreducible alterity.

But we’re getting ahead of ourselves a bit. Let’s trace the trajectory of the essay itself. Following his preliminary framing of the issue of escape, he dives into the problem of need. “In reality, need is intimately tied to being, but not in the quality of privation. On the contrary, need will allow us to discover, not a limitation of that being that desires to surpass its limits in order to enrich and fulfill itself, but rather the purity of the fact of being, which already looks like an escape.”372 But where Bergo translates Levinas in terms of “need,” Simon Critchley actually argues that “desire” would be closer to Levinas’s meaning.373 “Desire,” rather than “need” better captures the sense of presence, rather than lack that is at the core of being—recall that being (oneself) is a burden, an imposition, and enchainment rather than a void.

This need/desire is only a problem when it becomes painful. “[Desire] becomes imperious only when it becomes suffering. And the specific mode of suffering that characterizes [desire] is malaise, or disquiet. Malaise is not a purely passive state, resting upon itself. The fact of being ill at ease [mal à son aise] is essentially dynamic.374 This malaise is an inability to stand still, a discomfort, a compulsion to move out, to escape. But the satisfaction of obtaining what one desires, i.e. the pleasure of this obtainment, is problematic. Pleasure is ultimately cruelly dissatisfying. Satisfaction cannot satisfy the desire to escape. The moment that pleasure ebbs, the reality of one’s enchainment, one’s riveted-ness to oneself comes crashing back in. Pleasure is a fleeting leap out of oneself, only to be snatched back and have the fact of one’s identity made all the more painfully obvious. As Critchley says, “Desire desires desire. Desire is not satisfied, it just deepens. Desire is that thing that hollows itself out.”375

This is where Levinas shifts to the emergence of shame. “The instant is not recaptured until the moment when pleasure is broken, after the supreme break, when the [human] being believed in complete ecstasy but was completely disappointed, and is entirely disappointed and ashamed to find himself again existing.”376 Shame is founded “on the very being of our being, on its incapacity to break with itself. Shame is founded on the solidarity of our being, which obliges us to claim responsibility for ourselves.”377 Shame is the crashing in of the feeling of being riveted to oneself after the promise inherent in pleasure reveals itself as false exit—shame is the enchainment of the I to itself.

To review the path we have just taken: Levinas takes us from escape, to the desire for escape, to malaise, to obtaining pleasure, to the shame after pleasure fails to yield escape. Levinas takes it one step further to nausea, “a case in which the nature of malaise appears in all its purity and to which the word ‘malaise’ applies par excellence.”378 The analogy of nausea is Levinas’s phenomenological model for the experience of enchainment to being as such. Unlike other insurmountable obstacles imposed on us from without, we cannot turn away from nausea.

Nausea, on the contrary, sticks to us. Yet it would not be correct to say that nausea is an obstacle that we cannot dodge. That would again be to maintain a duality between us and it… There is in nausea a refusal to remain there, an effort to get out. Yet this effort is always already characterized as desperate: in any case, it is so for any attempt to act or to think. And this despair, this fact of being riveted, constitutes all the anxiety of nausea. In nausea—which amounts to an impossibility of being what one is—we are at the same time riveted to ourselves, enclosed in a tight circle that smothers. We are there, and there is nothing more to be done, or anything to add to this face that we have been entirely delivered up, that everything is consumed: this is the very experience of our pure being, which we have promised from the beginning of this work.379

The rivet-ness to oneself is shown as an obstacle from within, to which one cannot but be bound. Nausea itself constitutes the relationship between nausea and us. “Nausea posits itself not only as something absolute, but as the very act of self-positing; it is the affirmation itself of being. It refers only to itself, is closed to all the rest, without window onto other things.”380

This feeling of riveted-ness to oneself, to one’s place within being and in relation to being finds brilliant demonstration in the relationship of characters to the limitations of the social ontology built in Sam Delany’s The Star Pit. The feeling of being trapped, but not by anything other than being itself and authenticity. Vyme wrestles of course with limitations of his ability to travel, but more importantly he wrestles with himself within those limitations, as we will see.381