

SECTION IV

PLATONISMS OF THE POSTMODERN WORLD

THE FACE OF THE OTHER:
A COMPARISON BETWEEN THE THOUGHT
OF EMMANUEL LEVINAS, PLATO, AND PLOTINUS

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1. *The problem*

The story of the rise and fall of substance in Western thought, it would seem, has not accorded much importance to the face of the other. The very terms, *ousia*: stuff or material reality, and *substantia*: that which stands under appearances, seem at odds with the reality of the human glance or gaze. And so *ousia* or *substantia* came to mean the finite or limiting element for or in things, that which made them what they were or, as spiritual, that which guaranteed their intelligibility. The birth of modern thought in Descartes preserved this limiting, defining nature of substance by splitting it into two kinds of *thing*: *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, but their ‘thinginess’ was to be short-lived. Under the scrutiny of the British Empiricists, each kind of thing evaporated into indeterminate *x-es* or bundles of constant contiguity, and while Leibniz tried to bridge the gap between two sorts of *thing*, spiritual and material, by grounding reality in self-dependent monads, Spinoza quite naturally found the only truly self-dependent substance to be God (*Deus sive Natura*). And so, despite Kant’s attempt to overcome the skepticism of Hume, the story of substance in the First *Critique* is the story of the paralogism of substance and the split between a world of appearances alone accessible to us, on the one hand, and the noumenal world, on the other, inaccessible to cognitive scrutiny. Part of the ironic heritage of Post-Kantian thought in the contemporary world is that no one reads or takes seriously all three *Critiques* together, and so Kant’s attempt to mediate the rather restricted picture of the *Critique of Pure Reason* with those of the *Critique of Practical Reason* and of *Judgment* remains relatively unnoticed. Indeed too, Hegel’s trail-blazing attempt to uncover the delineations of the “whole” already implicit, as it were, in the positivity and neg-