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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

ONTOLOGY IN EMMANUEL LEVINAS'S PHILOSOPHY

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN PHILOSOPHY

BY

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CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

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## PREFACE

The work you are about to read was motivated primarily by the author's interest in that strange Levinasian notion, *il y a*: what is it? How does it function, and how did Levinas arrive at it? What becomes of it in Levinas's later work?

Over the course of his career, Levinas maintained a tempestuous and vexed relationship with ontology and with being as it functions and is described in ontological investigations. *Il y a* — “there is...” — is not the first way in which Levinas attempts to formulate what troubles him about being—a generality that manifests as an anonymity and indifference that is far from being neutral with respect to human subjectivity. Nor is *il y a* the first sign that Levinas is troubled by the project of phenomenology as fundamental ontology, which Heidegger had at least partially sketched and justified in *Being and Time* (1927). The culmination of a line of thinking and struggle with philosophical assumptions about the priority of being, Levinas's development of the notion of *il y a* is spurred by descriptions of death and evil as non-being in philosophical analysis, which both leads to ontological investigations of these phenomena, and to their misinterpretation. Death becomes a revelatory moment of the whole of a being; evil becomes reducible to an absence of being. Levinas's philosophy begins when he asks whether such interpretations can stand, and whether a phenomenological ontology can serve as the method to access these phenomena.

The philosophical privilege of being, based on the need to avoid giving either

parity or privilege to non-being, as Levinas tells the story of philosophies emerging from Greek thought, prevented philosophers from recognizing the inadequacy of ontology to ethical life, i.e., life lived in the face of human existents. Even Heidegger, by privileging death as the moment of the impossibility of my possibility of being, a moment crucial for any attempt to articulate the meaning of being, falls prey to the tendency to give priority to the couple being/nothingness—he simply privileges this couple as a description of being different from individual beings, on Levinas's reading. In formulating *il y a* Levinas attempts to upset the productive dialectic of being and nothing: “there is...” is one term in the formulation of ontological difference between being and an individual being, and in Levinas's hands, Heidegger's mention of being in *Being and Time* as “there is” becomes a horrifyingly fruitless presencing of that which is neither a being nor time nor grounded upon nothingness as a dialectical counter-concept of being.

In terms of his own positive project, *il y a* serves as Levinas's justification for seeking a beyond of being<sup>1</sup>: within his analysis, *il y a* is an evil *of* being, not because it constitutes a lack or a deficiency of the presence of being—*il y a* is not a phenomenon exclusively attached to becoming, if becoming is considered as the opposite of being or as a moment of being—but because it *is* the very a-subjective being-present of being, and so insurmountable within the movement of being. “There is...” sets out a problem that Levinas would pursue throughout his career: if ontological difference accomplishes only itself, and accomplishes itself indifferently to human aspiration or desire, then how to transcend the terms of being and of ontological research in order to speak of interhuman

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<sup>1</sup> And a beyond of nothingness as simply the privation of being.

relationships? For these latter always and primarily unfold an order of value: they signify axiologically, on Levinas's reading, more<sup>2</sup> than they do ontologically, and the axiological signification is irreducible to any ontological signification.

When Levinas first articulated the notion of *il y a*, the beyond of ontological difference remained incompletely analyzed: the transcendence of being was proposed more than carefully articulated and described. Nevertheless, a reader following Levinas's work chronologically would expect him to continue to work out the transcendence of ontological difference in relation to *il y a*, its indifference, and the evil that he understands the indifference of being to signify.

Yet *il y a* being mostly disappears from his work. Levinas will hold steadfastly to the claim that *il y a* remains an important presupposition of his work,<sup>3</sup> but if he requires “a consistent conception of Being”<sup>4</sup> in order to work out what counts as transcendence, *il y a* is not that conception. For after 1948, despite its occasional appearances in other texts, it goes largely undiscussed. It is hardly even mentioned. Not until 1974 does Levinas give *il y a* any renewed analytical attention, and then only for a short section which does as much to confuse as to clarify, as we shall see in chapter five of the present work. For in that late text, it is unclear that we can consider *il y a* to signify the pure indifference of a direct and primary ontological relationship between being and

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<sup>2</sup> The reader hopefully will forgive the imprecision of this “more.” The point is that such relationships do not simply cancel or negate ontological relationships, but neither are they bound absolutely by them. The difficulty in articulating this point is a risk one runs with Levinas, and in the knowledge that he used forty years trying to say the “more” of “transcendence.”

<sup>3</sup> See his 1981 interview with Philippe N  mo: EI 51/EaI 52.

<sup>4</sup> Bettina Bergo, “Levinas's 'ontology' 1935-1974” in *Emmanuel Levinas: Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers*, eds. Claire E. Katz and Lara Trout, vol. 1 (New York: Routledge, 2005), 27.

the individual existent, i.e., the subject of being.

Why, then, do I focus on what may, at the end of the day, be a marginal concept, and which is, itself, problematic? Precisely because *il y a* had articulated how being *is*, such that its very being demanded transcendence *of some sort*: regardless of one's eventual evaluation of the viability of *il y a*, it seems to me undeniable that it was intended to pose the most intractable problem to fundamental ontology and the priority of analysis based on the ontologically articulated difference between being and beings. As such, its eclipse by other concepts and descriptions of being is remarkable, the more so given Levinas's claim that *il y a* remains at the foundations of his thought.

Commentators will often assume continuity throughout Levinas's thought—sometimes without qualification, sometimes *despite* noting that Levinas does give different ontologies at different times in his career.<sup>5</sup> Yet it seems to me that neither of these positions in the end is warranted without reservation. This is not to say that there is no continuity in Levinas's work, but that this continuity need not lie in his articulation of being or its sense.

Does *il y a* retain its original pride of place—that of the problem to be confronted and from which to make an escape—in Levinas's work? That is to say, in the work of Levinas as we all know him now, after *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than being*? Or has there been a quiet shift in the nature of being, and thereby of the problem to which Levinas's work must respond? If the former, then why does *il y a* nearly disappear? If the latter, then what is the nature of the shift, and what becomes of being and ontology?

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<sup>5</sup> For example, Bettina Bergo, *ibid.*

These questions came to guide the present work; they have necessitated a review of Levinas's analysis of being and subjectivity at each major stage of his thought in order to identify both continuity and difference (often unreconciled) within Levinas's conception of being and ontology. I make no claim to great originality: many others have argued that Levinas's ontology cannot support all of his conclusions. Nor can I claim to have reconciled all or even the most significant claims Levinas puts forward concerning ontology over the course of his philosophical career, only to have shown that certain tensions in Levinas's work, when exposed to others of his analyses, seem to warrant reading being and ontology in a more positive light than Levinas *often* interprets them.

What is finally at stake in rereading and analyzing Levinas's ontology is, I think, the question of whether ontological evil can stand: is the structure of being in the end the mode under which we should interrogate and analyze the massive human misery that affects us all, in one fashion or another, whether or not we admit that such a vast sump of misery is *our* problem? Do even certain of Levinas's own analyses allow for ontological evil to stand as a significant term of analysis, or must a different relationship between ontology and ethical relationships be worked out?

It seems impossible to me to avoid answering that justice demands for being a new face—in a Levinasian sense of this term—if we are to avoid both real difficulties of Levinas's work<sup>6</sup> and a scholasticism that does a disservice to the work of justice that

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Seamus Carey's (1997) criticism of the faceless body of the Levinasian ego: "[Levinas] sees the body, which is confined to the realm of its own horizon, as that which must be broken through by the transcendent face of the other. By separating the transcendent face from the body in this way, Levinas's ethical project [...] fails to give an adequate account of how one is to move, or can be prepared to move, out of the realm of the body of labor and towards the face of the other" (447). See likewise Bautista and Peperzak, "Unspoken Unity: I, Who Desire and Enjoy" (forthcoming) on the incapacity of the victim to speak when I am that victim, if I do not in relationship with the other come to learn that I, too, face others.



Levinas's philosophy, in fact, calls for. For it seems to me that if Levinas is a witness to injustice, whose testimony is philosophical, that testimony can have but one purpose in the end: to move us to act upon *what* it describes, not *only* to contest concerning *how* Levinas describes the obligation to others that constitutes my humanity.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

### Works by Levinas

All translations are my own, unless specified to be the work of another.

#### Books

- AE:** *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*. Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991.
- DE:** *De l'évasion*. Introduction et annotation par Jacques Rolland. Paris: Fata Morgana, 1982. Originally published in 1935.
- DEE:** *De l'existence à l'existant*. Paris: Éditions de la Revue Fontaine, 1947.
- DEH:** *Discovering Existence with Husserl*. Trans. and eds. Richard Cohen and Michael B. Smith. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998.
- DF:** *Difficult Freedom; Essays on Judaism*. Trans. Seán Hand. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1990.
- DL:** *Difficile liberté; essais sur le judaïsme*. 3<sup>e</sup> édition. Paris: Éditions Albin Michel, 1976.
- EDE:** *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*. 2<sup>e</sup> édition. Paris: Vrin, 1967.
- EE:** *Existence and Existents*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2001.
- EaI:** *Ethics and Infinity; Conversations with Philippe Nemo*. Trans. Richard A. Cohen. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985.
- EI:** *Éthique et Infini; Dialogues avec Philippe Nemo*. Paris: Fayard, 1982.
- EN:** *Entre Nous; essais sur le penser-à-l'autre*. Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1991.
- ENe:** *Entre nous: on thinking-of-the-other*. Trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.

- OB:** *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1997.
- OE:** *On Escape*. Introduction and annotation by Jacques Rolland. Trans. Bettina Bergo. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003.
- QRPH:** *Quelques réflexions sur la philosophie de l'hitlérisme*. Paris: Éditions Payot & Rivages, 1997.
- SFG:** "The understanding of spirituality in French and German culture." Trans. Andrius Valevius. *Continental Philosophy Review* 31, no. 1 (1998): 1-10. Originally published in Lithuanian, as "Dvasiškumo supratimas prancūzu ir vokieiu kultūroje." *Vairas* (Kaunas) 7, no. 5 (1933): 271–280.
- RPH:** "Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism." Trans. Seán Hand. *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 1 (1990): 62-71.
- TA:** *Le temps et l'autre*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1983
- TeI:** *Totalité et Infini*. 2<sup>e</sup> édition. La Haye: Martinus Nijhoff, 1965.
- TI:** *Totality and Infinity*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969.
- TO:** *Time and the Other*. Trans. Richard Cohen. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987.

### Frequently Referenced Essays

- IaM:** "Intentionality and Metaphysics" in DEH, 122-129.
- IM:** "Intentionalité et métaphysique" in EDE, 137-144. Originally published in *Revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger* 84, no. 4 (1959) : 471-479.
- LaP:** "Language and Proximity" in *Collected Philosophical Papers; Emmanuel Levinas*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998. 109-126.
- LP:** "Langage et proximité" in EDE, 217-236.
- RR:** "La ruine de la représentation" in EDE, 125-135. First published in *Edmund Husserl 1859-1959*, commemorative collection. La Haye: Nijhoff, 1959. 73-85.

**RoR:** “The Ruin of Representation” in DEH, 111-121.

**RTP:** “Réflexions sur la <<technique>> phénoménologique” in EDE, 111-123. First published in *Husserl*, Cahiers de Royaumont, *Philosophie* n. 3, Editions de Minuit (1959): 95-107.

**RPT:** “Reflections on the phenomenological 'technique'” in DEH, 91-101.

**OEH:** “L'œuvre d'Edmond Husserl” in EDE, 7-52. First published in *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l'Etranger* 65, no. 1-2 (1940): 33-85.

**WEH:** “The Work of Edmund Husserl” in DEH, 47-86.

# CHAPTER ONE

## THE ROAD TO *IL YA*

### Introduction

*Il y a* is Levinas's first original contribution to the lexicon of philosophical concepts. Emerging in the essay "Il y a," in 1946,<sup>1</sup> the description of being named under the concept of *il y a* went on to become the difficult heart of Levinas's first personal philosophical work, *From Existence to Existents* (1947). Although the term *il y a* first appears in 1946 and 1947, *il y a* retrieves and reorders themes that Levinas had begun to develop as early as 1933, in "The understanding of spirituality in French and German culture."<sup>2</sup> This early essay<sup>3</sup> in fact furnishes the themes that will orient the ontological investigation of politics that Levinas would develop in *Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism* (1934): liberation and fate, reason and "concrete existence"<sup>4</sup> dominate these two texts. These themes will be taken up again in more evidently ontological and

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<sup>1</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, "Il y a," *Deucalion* 1 (1946): 141-154.

<sup>2</sup> Originally published in Lithuanian in a journal that did not survive World War II, this article's target—the concept of spirituality, as it is determined by the characteristic intellectual culture of France and Germany—clearly bears on and is born of the political situation of 1933.

<sup>3</sup> Which disavows any explicit political diagnosis or evaluation of the cultures whose understanding of spirituality (or *Geistigkeit* and its equivalent terms) is examined, yet which is clearly attuned to the increasingly more dangerous politics of the day.

<sup>4</sup> Which term Levinas does not hesitate at this time to have encompass the biological, the psychological, the sentimental, materiality, and all that escapes the disembodied light of rationalist reason.

phenomenological fashion in 1935 in *On Escape*.<sup>5</sup> But it remains the work of *Existence and Existence* and *Time and the Other* to give them their definitive philosophical orientation, and the result is the notion of *il y a* existence, which articulates an ontology from which we must “escape.”

As the titles of the 1933 and 1934 works suggest, the problem that *il y a* ultimately expresses for humanity is born of Levinas's political concerns.<sup>6</sup> Although Levinas was not a politician, nor was his philosophy a political philosophy *per se*, it has been amply demonstrated that Levinas's work is steeped in politics.<sup>7</sup> In this regard, Howard Caygill's work is as exemplary as it is thorough.<sup>8</sup> Thus despite the rare

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<sup>5</sup> Though even here, the political remains as a background that can inform and illuminate a reading of a text which, despite its analysis of the bourgeois capitalist, appears rather depoliticized. This claim will receive support in later analyses.

<sup>6</sup> What are these concerns? Howard Caygill (2002) argues that Levinas's political philosophical interests revolve around a rethinking and reformulation of the nature and relationships among the terms of the secular revolutionary triad of French political life: liberty, equality, and fraternity. Liberty, in the sense of “liberation,” is certainly a constant theme, and places Levinas squarely in line with the dominant trend of French philosophical thought of the twentieth century, if one accepts the thesis of Gary Gutting that “twentieth-century French philosophy is best read as a sustained reflection on the problem of individual freedom” (xi). See Gary Gutting, *French Philosophy in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2001). See also Howard Caygill, *Levinas and the Political* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> See Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1999), 219-236; Marinos Diamantides, “From Escape to Hostage” in *Difficult Justice: Commentaries on Levinas and Politics*, eds. Asher Horowitz and Gad Horowitz (Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2006): 191-220; and as concerns the political status of *il y a* in particular, see Jean-Luc Lannoy, “‘Il y a’ et la phénoménologie dans la pensée du jeune Lévinas,” *Revue philosophique de Louvain* 88(79) (1990): 369-394. Note that of the writers just mentioned, Critchley alone focuses exclusively on those few passages Levinas dedicates to analyzing the relationship between one face and many faces, which marks the moment when politics returns as the field of my acting responsibly and justly.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Howard Caygill, *Levinas and the Political* and “The *Esprit* articles: 1934-1983” in *Emmanuel Levinas: Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers*, eds. Claire E. Katz and Lara Wagner, vol. 4 *Beyond Levinas* (New York: Routledge, 2005): 85-100. Caygill's work represents the first sustained analysis of the political dimension of Levinas's thought, and its reading of Levinas's philosophical concerns is novel with respect to the majority of the secondary literature on Levinas's politics.



occurrences of the word “politics” or of expressly political concerns in Levinas’s mature philosophical works, his philosophy can be said to rely upon an ontologization of the political, or a reduction of politically expressed concerns, conflicts, and contradictions to their ontological<sup>9</sup> significance. For it is in and through the political that a certain “dimension”<sup>10</sup> of being emerges: the “dimension” of the inhuman and the anti-human, of anonymity, of *evil* as the evil *of* being, rather than an evil “in” being.<sup>11</sup>

Thus we should expect that Levinas’s “philosophical problematic” will not take aim *only* at the apparently apolitical sphere of traditional Western metaphysics. By attacking the ontological bases of Western politics, or by showing the way in which certain key political concepts (such as liberty) are constituted by certain fundamental *ontological*<sup>12</sup> intentions, which intentions structure and trouble concrete human life, Levinas takes critical aim at the political solutions human beings (especially modern human beings) have proposed to regulate our interactions over these troubling intentions. The concept of *il y a* designates the ontological ‘phenomenon’ that underlies the political opposition of Western “liberalism” and Nazi racism, a crisis of “the very humanity of the human.”<sup>13</sup> This crisis brings to light the problem of a fundamental desubjectivizing

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<sup>9</sup> And later ethical, in Levinas’s properly technical sense of this term. See chapter five of the present work especially.

<sup>10</sup> Which in truth is not a dimension, for this already is a misrepresentation of what does not fall within the purview or power of representation. This point will be taken up when we turn to *From Existence to the Existent*.

<sup>11</sup> DEE 19/EE 4.

<sup>12</sup> Or, later, responsibility, which is the mode of relationship opened by the personal other’s affecting my sensibility. See chapters four and, especially, five of the present work.

<sup>13</sup> QRPH 24/RPH 71.

powerlessness of the human, which Levinas will illuminate through the articulation of the concept and ontology of *il y a*. There is a fundamental unfreedom at work in being, or rather, that is the work *of* being—of existence—from which we must find some escape. It will be my task in this chapter to show how Levinas's early investigations form a coherent and consistent investigative effort into a single, if multi-faceted, “problem” of being, and to try to characterize both this problem and the *kind* of “solution” sought for it.

### **On the Road to *Il y a*: Reason, Sentiment, and “Spirituality” in 1933 and 1934**

Levinas's earliest *original* philosophical works—by which I mean works in which his aim was not to explicate Husserl or Heidegger, but in which he rather addressed himself to what he would later call “the presentiment... of the Nazi horror”<sup>14</sup>—revolve around a triad of concepts: reason, sentiment, and “spirituality” or the “humanity of the human.” At stake is human destiny: how do we have access to our deepest human destiny or “spirituality”? Is it through reason or sentiment that we come to obey the fundamental philosophical imperative to “Know thyself”? What *are* reason and sentiment? What difference does the 'choice' for reason or for sentiment make with respect to what it is that we come to (our “spirituality”) when we come to ourselves as human beings?

In “The understanding of spirituality in French and German culture” (1933), Levinas uses this triad to set up the conflict of human destinies that will govern later works. In this brief essay, Levinas's aim is not to establish either the Frenchness of the French nor the Germanness of the Germans *per se*, but to establish the meaning(s) of “spirituality,” as this notion is figured in the French and German literary and

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<sup>14</sup> DL 374/DF 291.

philosophical cultures of the time. Levinas's analysis of his two adopted cultures is staged as the opposition of Descartes and Cartesianism to “Romanticism”<sup>15</sup>: the opposition of classical rationalism to the sentimental humanity of the Romantics.<sup>16</sup>

The Cartesian tradition, writes Levinas, with its radical separation of *res extensa* from *res cogitans*, and its identification of spirit with the latter, can only view the participation of bodily and biological life in the life of spirit as a contamination of spirituality (SFG 2). For the Cartesian, to assume that one could, from the given communion of body and soul in a human person, arrive at an adequate concept of spirit is to make a fundamental error that will have deleterious effects on every subsequent endeavor to describe and understand human spirituality. To understand spirit is therefore to understand it as having absolutely nothing in common with matter or with any of the processes and relationships proper to or involving matter.

In view of typically French rationalism, writes Levinas, “spirit is not only seen as separate from inert matter, but it is also higher than any kind of biological life. [...] The true life of spirit is elsewhere. Spirit, and this is typical of French culture up until now

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<sup>15</sup> The meaning of this term “Romanticism” is incredibly obscure. In 1933, Levinas uses it to speak of a certain expression of German spirituality, but unless one counts Thomas Mann as a romantic, he names no names, and seems to mean by it simply a focus on and privileging of the sentimental as mode of access to a dramatic human destiny.

<sup>16</sup> Levinas's characterization of “French spirituality,” with its emphasis on Cartesian rationalism, may well be indebted to Victor Delbos's *La Philosophie française* (1919). This work, published posthumously just after the end of World War I, laid out the argument of his polemical 1915-1916 lecture course: there, Delbos claimed that there was a national French philosophy, distinct from German philosophy, and whose main figures are often of a very rationalist bent. Cf. Alan D. Schrift, *Twentieth Century French Philosophy: key themes and thinkers* (Malden, MA : Blackwell Pub., 2006), 1. On the other hand, Levinas's characterization of the “typically French” way of understanding spirit need not be seen as rationalist per se, but as describing the spiritualist tendency within French philosophical thought that derived from, but ultimately tended to reject the strong mind-body dualism of Cartesian metaphysics. See Gutting, *French Philosophy*, 9-10.

[1933], is pure thought, beyond imagination, sensations and passions” (SFG 2). Feeling, sentiment, passion, emotion—all of these are relegated to the realm of non-reason, and so stripped of significance. It is rationality that is meaningful. Thus what is comprehensible and meaningful in the self and in the world—its elements and relations—is rational (SFG 3); the rest is obscure confusion.

By contrast, Levinas claims that what is more typical of German culture<sup>17</sup> is the assumption that reason has its foundation in feeling, for spirituality is given through and in “concrete existence.” “Concrete existence” encompasses all that had been excluded from the Cartesian concept of spirituality. The identification of spirit with concrete existence “rationalizes”—or rather, “spiritualizes”<sup>18</sup>—what the French rationalist tradition had relegated to the meaningless realm of mere matter. Phenomenology’s essential contribution—the intentionality of all contents of consciousness, including feeling, passions, and emotions—here appears as a consequence of this Germanic refusal to accept the Cartesian division of being into pure extension and pure thinking (SFG 5).

The intrinsically feeling or sentimental character of conscious thought prevents a fall back into the Cartesian affirmation of a pure reason; at the same time, the directedness and truth-oriented character of consciousness enables “Romanticism” and its offshoots to claim for feeling an intrinsic orientation towards truth. Feeling becomes

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<sup>17</sup> With some notable exceptions—Levinas lists Leibniz, Kant, and the neo-Kantians, just as he notes Pascal as an exception to the French rationalist tradition.

<sup>18</sup> Cf., for example, F.W.J. Schelling, “Ages of the World,” *The Abyss of Freedom/Ages of the World*, trans. Judith Norman (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997):150-151. Levinas’s point is that the major part of the German literary and philosophical tradition understands sentiment to function as access to truth, and so in that regard has a “spiritual” or “rational” dimension *in itself* that the major part of the French literary-philosophical tradition denies it. Thus from the standpoint of rationalism, the German tradition “spiritualizes” matter.

revelatory, not merely blind, though it is “blind” to reasoning that rejects the vital: the opposition of feeling and reason remains.

This opposition raises a question: if, on the one hand, the human person is an indissoluble union, such that indeed, all consciousness is feeling consciousness, and all feeling is truth-oriented just because also consciousness, then it is unclear how reason and feeling could be strictly opposed to each other,<sup>19</sup> nor why feeling should be privileged over reason. If, on the other hand, within the union of the human person, there are two tendencies that, though bound to each other, are nevertheless distinct enough that they can become disarticulated from each other and end in opposition, then although feeling is to found reason, there remains a central tension within the human person. Yet the precise nature of the relation of reason to its foundation, such that it can conflict with it, remains obscure.<sup>20</sup>

Levinas does not offer at this time a reading of the persistence of the conflict of reason and feeling that constitutes the essential drama of the concept of spirituality that he finds characteristic of German culture. For his purposes, it is not the internal contradictions and tensions of each of the concepts of spirituality that matter, but the genesis of contradictory notions of spirituality across the two cultures: for this cross-cultural difference puts him in a position to confront the two concepts of spirituality in the third, and longest, section of the paper, entitled “The hidden forces of being.” This confrontation proves decisive for the direction of Levinas's work, as it brings out the

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<sup>19</sup> So much so that feeling is characterized as “blind-to-reason” (SFG 4).

<sup>20</sup> Levinas will develop in somewhat more detail the relationship of reason and feeling under the rubric of sensibility and consciousness in his later work. See chapter three, p. 124 ff.

uneasy (and even questionable) coexistence of these two spiritualities.

Levinas has recourse in this final analysis to Thomas Mann's *Zauberberg*, which he places beside the work of Proust as "the greatest literary event of our time" (SFG 6). What fascinates—and concerns—Levinas is the way in which the "hidden forces of being" that lie behind spirituality-*cum*-concrete existence, as opposed to spirituality-*cum*-light of rationality, so clearly are portrayed in the novel as overwhelming reason. The residents of the Magic Mountain—all of whom experience a kind of spiritual awakening through their very illness as it alters and affects their feeling, bodily constitution—fall quickly under the sway of one Peeperkorn, a gross and barely articulate creature whose material presence overwhelms and attracts (SFG 9):

[...] Mynheer Peeperkorn [is] a heavy-set man who likes to eat well, drink and make merry. His idea of the ideal life is one of emotion and sensual pleasure, and he sees the lack of these experiences in a weak person to be a cosmic catastrophe, as he himself says. He speaks in monosyllables, and his sentences are not related to each other. It seems that he does not think. If the "honor of man is his thought," is Peeperkorn a man?<sup>21</sup>

Is Peeperkorn a man? In Levinas's analysis, he is at once the "true person" according to the sentimental conception of spirituality, and the almost inhuman embodiment of the essentially material, of the "hidden forces of being." Peeperkorn represents neither crudely material force nor a pantheist force of nature—he "eclipses" them both (SFG 9). His power and his "profundity" come not from any spiritual quality, if by this one means either rationality or even a developed sentiment, but rather from his opaque, monotonous massiveness that "knows how to feel and to live" (SFG 9). Peeperkorn, who loves to eat

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<sup>21</sup> SFG 8-9.

well, absorbs reason itself (SFG 10): Settembrini, the novel's representative of the "Latin-French tradition," which, for Levinas, is "of special interest to this study," is powerless in the face of this unthinking presence.

Why should the Latin-French tradition be of special interest to Levinas? It is 1933, and the Nazi party is rising. It is the year of Heidegger's infamous rector's address. The inability to resist Peeperkorn comes of the way in which the identification of spirituality with the vitality of the sentimental orients us towards a force that paralyzes and undermines reason. "It is easy to forget, to loose [sic]<sup>22</sup> your balance when you imagine yourself hearing a mystical voice in the depths of your soul," Levinas writes, and notes that "[i]t is no coincidence that extremist political parties, which are presently so strong in Germany, are enchanted with this notion of spirit" (SFG 6). Although Levinas, in the final section of his essay, bills *Zauberberg* as a novel that is "a living embodiment of the concepts [of spirituality] which I have briefly presented," which statement suggests an even-handed depiction of both notions of spirit, Levinas cannot avoid recognizing the way in which Mann presents the two spiritualities as of unequal power. Peeperkorn reduces the reasoned resistance of Settembrini to a "caricature" (SFG 10) that the main character, Castorp, calls ridiculous and silly.<sup>23</sup> The Judeo-Christian character, Naphta, also fails to save Castorp from falling into Peeperkorn's orbit. There is something unsettling about the force of Peeperkorn—unsettling, dangerous, and the sentiment that

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<sup>22</sup> Since the original article is in Lithuanian, it seems highly unlikely that substituting "loose" for "lose" would be a common error; this is most likely an error that occurred during the process of translation.

<sup>23</sup> And since Kant, what is more deadly antithetical to the noble and the sublime of reason than ridicule and silliness?

opens onto this force appears to be falsifying, to generate illusions (SFG 10). Before its power, reason is stripped of its sense.

Perhaps this powerlessness of reason would matter less if the ‘German’ tradition could furnish a seat of resistance to the forces of being. On Levinas’s reading, Mann in fact suggests one: in a passage reminiscent of Michel Foucault *avant la lettre*, Levinas speculates that in the character of Ziemssen, a soldier, the ontological meaning of Prussia’s military discipline is brought forth as a power to combat that over which reason cannot prevail (SFG 9). Through regimentation of the body and its sentimental life, that in being that Peeperkorn represents may be tamed, at least, and so overcome. Yet Ziemssen, too, fails to draw Castorp away from Peeperkorn, which Levinas interprets as signifying that it is not only the Latin-French tradition that fails.

Yet Levinas has philosophical commitments to the phenomenological movement, and so to the theory of sentimentality it presupposes, that he never surrenders: feeling does remain an oriented feeling, rather than being, for him, a meaningless biological phenomenon. Being, as a hidden and dark force that directs life while undoing its sense, presents a problem whose terms Levinas has not yet fully elucidated, though he has begun to discover its presence and dimensions. The powerlessness of the rationalist tradition troubles him, and this powerlessness in the face of being will drive a lifelong effort to secure, if not *power* for what reason here stands for (spirituality, the “humanity of the human”), at least *sense*.

Despite his concerns, however, Levinas in 1933 attempts to confine his essay to a merely comparative, and (at least *explicitly*) non-judgmental task: to elucidate the concept



of “spirituality” as it appears in the literature and philosophy of two cultures. In terms of the relative power of these two directly opposed stances towards human spirit, he contents himself with presenting briefly what he takes to be Thomas Mann’s meditation on the efficacy of the strategies to resist and combat Peeperkorn, the bearer of the force of being. In doing so, one can nevertheless clearly see the tension in Levinas’s thought. He would like to present *Zauberberg* as embodying, in its depictions of different characters’ attitudes and comportment, both spiritualities; at the same time he claims explicitly that neither spirituality is better than the other, which suggests that a good embodiment would need to reflect the equal dignity of both spiritualities. It should thus go without saying that if *Zauberberg* is the greatest literary event of modern times precisely *because* of its depiction of the two spiritualities, it should show that despite fundamental differences in these conceptions of human spirituality, they enjoy no advantage over each other. Yet Levinas recognizes that the novel finally ends by elevating Peeperkorn over Naphta, Settembrini, and Ziemssen in a way that diminishes the possibilities and traditions that these latter three characters embody. This leads Levinas to suggest that Thomas Mann had been unable

to completely liberate himself, in the highest educational meaning of the word, from the influence of the magic mountain. He knows the ways of salvation of Naphta, Settembrini and Joachim Ziemssen, but he does not follow them. Joachim Ziemssen dies, and Thomas Mann’s Settembrini speaks like a malicious caricature of French culture (SFG 10).

Levinas here appears to retain a certain confidence that the “Latin-French” tradition and also the Judeo-Christian tradition have the resources to overcome the challenge presented by Peeperkorn-being; even Ziemssen, who represents a tradition *within* the Germanic

notion of spirituality, remains a neglected “[way] of salvation.” Thus their defeat gives rise to a certain dissatisfaction with the novel, which colors the tone of the final paragraphs of the essay.

Levinas does not expand upon his discontent, however. Peeperkorn’s massive presence, the power of the opacity or shadow of being, which are associated with the vital dimension of life, will remain to be contested in later works. The notion that there is a need to “liberate” oneself from this disturbing presence, in its feeling vitality, massiveness, and inarticulateness, will remain as a theme throughout Levinas’s work, though who or what liberates, from what, and how, will change with time. So far as a reading of Levinas’s earliest original work is concerned, it suffices to note that Levinas has begun to find the coordinates of his original ontological problem: ‘reason’ as effecting a liberation from a problematic dark matter, given in feeling, “concrete existence”, that seems able to swallow everything.

Levinas will revisit these coordinates in 1934 in *Quelques réflexions sur la philosophie de l'hitlérisme*. Against then-contemporary (and perennially popular) readings of racism that would reduce it to a contingent perversion, Levinas argues that Hitlerian racism is “simplistic philosophy [*philosophie ... primaire*]”: despite its blinkered character, it is neither a simple contamination of right thinking nor mere madness. Rather, the terrifying content of Hitlerian philosophy, its “miserable phraseology” (and even more miserable practice), emerges under the pressure of “primitive forces” that awaken “elementary feelings” (QRPH 7/RPH 64). The justification of the claim of Hitlerism to philosophical status clearly rests on the theory of

sentimental spirituality that Levinas had earlier identified as typically German. At this point, Levinas finds himself squarely confronted with a clash of commitments that he had avoided a year earlier: in the *Zauberberg* analysis, Levinas had been dismayed that Mann had not shown that the “Latin-French” tradition of rationalism, whose metaphysics are so much more consonant with and so squarely allied with Jewish and Christian religious commitment, could resist the forces of being. But he had not developed an account of rationalism that made sense in terms of the theory of sentiment presupposed by his phenomenology, nor had Levinas attempted to criticize on philosophical grounds the being that the theory of sentiment seemed to issue into, as figured by Peeperkorn. As a Jewish phenomenologist facing Nazism, however, and so caught in an apparently paradoxical and certainly painful position, it became necessary for Levinas to find a way to save the theory of the signifyingness of sentiment that would simultaneously allow him to drive a wedge between phenomenology and Nazism, and to vindicate the *inspiration* of the liberal-rationalist spirituality.

Against the exclusive rationalist tendencies of French culture and its concept of spirituality, therefore, Levinas situated himself with that German tradition when he insisted that “the elementary sentiments contain a philosophy. They express the first attitude of the soul in the face of the ensemble of the real and its own destiny. They predetermine or prefigure the sense of the adventure that the soul will run in the world” (QRPH 7/RPH 64). Because sentiment is not blind, but rather articulates the primary orientation of the human being toward the real, and because this fundamental orientation by feeling is what opens onto the possibility of philosophy, it will not suffice, in order to

understand the significance of Hitlerism, to cast it as a simple *logical* contradiction of prevailing political tradition. This would be to come too late to Hitlerism, as it were, and risk missing that in concrete existence or being which makes Hitlerism—or any racism—perennially appealing.

To grasp Hitlerism, and the sense of the political crisis it has introduced, it will be necessary, Levinas claims, to reduce the terms of the crisis to their essential philosophical roots, which roots are not logical, but *intuitive*:

[A] logical contradiction cannot judge a concrete event. The signification of a logical contradiction that opposes two currents of ideas only fully appears if one returns to their source, to the intuition, to the original decision that renders them possible. It is in this spirit that we are going to expose these few reflections (QRPH 8/RPH 64).

Only if we can come to understand the sentimental structure of opposed ideas will the significance of their logical opposition appear, for it is the sentimental structure that furnishes us with the source that governs their meaning.<sup>24</sup> But this sentimental structure and its sense are not to be found anywhere but in the concrete existence to which and in which sentiment responds. Intuition gives the “original decision” that makes it concretely possible to be a Nazi or to be otherwise than Nazi: it orients us in and through feeling to a

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<sup>24</sup> Michel Delhez calls this the “epochal reduction” of *Dasein*, “dear to Heideggerian phenomenology” (138), and argues that Levinas’s deployment of this reduction is in the service of a kind of disguised Kantian liberalism (134-137). See Michel Delhez, “La ‘Kehre’ levinassienne” in *Revue philosophique de Louvain*. 100(1-2) (2002) : 129-148. The conformity of Levinasian politics with liberalism has been remarked before, by Pierre Hayat (1997), for example; and Richard Cohen, in his “Political Monotheism” (2003), has argued that Levinasian politics are in fact “classical liberalism.” The radicality of certain dimensions of Levinas’s thought does tend to rest uneasily with Levinas’s explicit writings on politics or the nature of political life, and different authors will tend to emphasize the radical moments of his thinking or else its traditional liberal character, depending upon the question they wish to address. To me, it seems undeniable that Levinas does not furnish, nor has any intention of furnishing, a political philosophy *per se*, in the fullest sense, nor does he develop a notion of communal subjectivity that could adequately describe effective political agents and actors. Instead, he describes relationships simultaneously at risk within the political process, and impelling human beings toward political life and action (though not in every case, of course).

source of meaning that logic, when understood through the Cartesian-rationalist separation of reason from concrete life, cannot give. For that rationalist tradition, and the logic it would use to oppose and make sense of concrete events, has already ruled out in advance the possibility that feeling or the concrete could signify *per se* (SFG 4, 5); thus it would be impossible for such a logic or reason to judge the significance of an event of the concrete.

If Hitlerism “contradicts” prevailing tradition, politically and otherwise, then the appropriate meaning of the contradiction is not logical negation of one proposition by another, but “conflict.” The elementary feeling of Hitlerism must fundamentally conflict with a different elementary feeling. Levinas argues that the feeling proper to Hitlerism “contradicts” the “feeling of absolute liberty,” which he finds to be proper to Christianity, Judaism, and (in a more limited and reduced way) political and philosophical liberalism (QRPH 8/64). Moreover, though Levinas does not make the generalization, we can infer that an elementary sentiment opens onto a complex of “the real and [the soul’s] own destiny” (QRPH 7/RPH 64). If Hitlerism and a (broadly understood) liberal tradition are each moved and inspired by an elementary feeling, then each of these feelings, insofar as elementary, must open onto “the real” in which the destiny of the human soul is involved. Thus it is necessary for Levinas first to describe “the real” [*le réel*] onto which these feelings in fact commonly open, before considering how this real plays into contradictory destinies.

What is “the real”? Levinas does not return us to this term in any explicit manner, which requires us to extrapolate somewhat. However, if one assumes that the real is what

is given in common between the feeling of absolute liberty and the feeling of “enchainment” (QRPH 19/RPH 69), while destiny varies between them, then the real is clearly the historical being that conditions concrete human existence (QRPH 9/RPH 65). Historical being—the historicity of historical being, one might say, given the context—is given essentially as a limit: “the most profound, the fundamental limitation” (QRPH 9/RPH 65). What is the nature of this fundamental limit? Levinas identifies the essential limitation of history as temporal: “Time, condition of human existence, is above all the condition of the irreparable. The *fait accompli*, borne by a present that flees, forever escapes the grasp of man, but weighs on his destiny” (QRPH 9/RPH 65). Thus the reality of the real, its historicity and our being, is temporally structured by an absolutely barred past. The bar or limit is present to us in the mode of irreparability—a limit on my freedom that admits of no undoing or amelioration.<sup>25</sup>

The concept of history at work here is in essence that of fate. Fate’s temporality is essentially a relationship of powerlessness in the present with respect to the past that determines my destiny. For Levinas, that powerlessness emerges in the passage of the present, which flees my grasp by falling into a past irreparably accomplished beyond any power of mine to affect, whether to “mar or mend.” Despite this modification of the notion of fate, the past remains the dominating temporality, subordinating the future, rendering the present ignoble because futile. Fate, which is an essentially Greek notion

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<sup>25</sup> The fact that, formally, this description of the historical past would fit well with the later account of the immemorial past of the other in many respects, is not merely an instance of situational irony: there is a real philosophical question as to whether Levinas can develop a criterion based in sensibility that could distinguish the immemorial past of *autrui* or of God from the immemorial past of sensible affection by any other being, including perhaps historical being. See chapter four of the present work, pp. 140-141, 187.

for Levinas, will be figured by tragedy, and by the capricious gods of myth,<sup>26</sup> again and again in Levinas's work.<sup>27</sup> The concept of Fate names the hidden force essential to that which goes its own way, removing itself from the realm of human power *but without thereby putting power as such into question*.<sup>28</sup> My powerlessness before time, my dependence on it and deliverance to its fatality, mark my unfreedom, show up my impotence; bitterness, a sense of tragedy—these are the feelings that “the real” as fatal, historical existence, naturally provokes in humanity (QRPH 10/RPH 65).

But how, precisely, does the human being intuit fate? Or to put it another way: *what* does elementary feeling (of whatever sort) feel, when it feelingly reveals our fated, historical existence? It is the analysis of Hitlerism that yields the answer: elementary feeling feels the body, but in a very particular manner. As will become apparent from Levinas's comparative analyses of Hitlerism and Judeo-Christianity, elementary feelings differ, and contradiction arises, in the precise *way* that the body is felt. Liberal thought and Judeo-Christian existence, both of which are constituted by the feeling of liberty, experience the body as strange *just because* the body seems to be the point where human spirit (liberty) meets an obstacle (QRPH 16/RPH 67-68). The body is the locus of the

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<sup>26</sup> See, for example, EN 58, 60-62/ENe 42, 44-46, TeI 115-116, 202/TI 142, 226-227.

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, DEE102/EE 58; TA 28-29/TO 50, although the position of fate within the genre, “tragedy,” is in question. Levinas's meditation on the nature of tragic heroism (TA 59-61/TO 71-73) makes plain that tragedy is the genre within which fate *is* overcome in the end, even if the hero dies; Levinas's understanding of the notion of fate, however, differs. For Levinas, fate reigns in that situation where heroism is defeated, where no “last chance” before death in which to act and hope still for deliverance, is found at all, and the subject sinks into total passivity (TA 60/TO 73). *Il y a* and its ontological difference are “fatal” or the articulation of “the fatality of being” because there is no “last chance” to escape before them, if one limits oneself to ontological analysis.

<sup>28</sup> Thus it should not be possible to confuse the fatefulness of being, as ‘refusing’ my grasp, with the anarchy of the face: although both fundamentally escape my power, their modes of doing so and their relationship to the power they deny to me, are different.

strange insofar as it is the locus of an illiberality which puts it at a distance from the Judeo-Christian and liberal conception of human destiny. By contrast, Hitlerism, and by implication every racist “philosophy,” feels the body as an “*absolute position*” (QRPH 18/RPH 68) from which one cannot take a distance, save in dangerous delusion (QRPH 20-21/RPH 69-70). Historicity—the real towards which elementary feeling orients us—is what it is, on this account, because it is fateful, and the truth or nature of the fateful comes to us through feeling our relationship to our bodies. With this in mind, we can turn now to the analyses by which Levinas constructs (or rather reconstructs) the contradiction playing out politically in 1934.

The spirit of liberty, the feeling of absolute freedom that Levinas develops primarily through his analysis of Christianity, positions the human being before a world. This world *does* present itself in all its irreparable weightiness as the fateful historical real described above, *but*:

To the Atrides who defend themselves under the grip of a past strange and brutal as a malediction, Christianity opposes a mystical drama. The cross liberates; and by the Eucharist which triumphs over time this liberation is of each day (QRPH 10/RPH 65).

The struggle against fate is not a futile tragedy, for humanity is destined for the liberation of the cross; the Eucharistic sacrifice, by recurring in each day, violates the temporal structure of historical (fatal) time—it does not function as a movement of the present towards the *fait accompli*, which marks the dominance of that past, but operates a different temporality. Christian time is a renewal that precisely opens a present that does not simply fall towards the irreparable past; rather, it frees up the present to affect the past: “True liberty, the true commencement [demands] a true present that, always at the



apogee of a destiny, eternally recommences it” (QRPH 9/RPH65). Judaism, too, shares this liberating temporal restructuring, as Levinas indicates ever so briefly:

Remorse—painful expression of the radical powerlessness to repair the irreparable—announces the generative repentance of pardon, that repairs; man is able in the present to modify something, able somewhat to erase the past (QRPH 9/RPH 65).<sup>29</sup>

Into the very feeling of our powerlessness, Judaism brings to light a reversal of fatality: what should be strictly the result of the work of time, which work is the generation of accomplished facts-fates beyond the purview of human power, becomes the announcement of the power of pardon. Remorse becomes generative, fruitful—it arouses pardon that “repair[s] the irreparable.” Similarly in Christianity, the Cross that is the very implement of deliverance to death—the irreparable *par excellence*—announces and generates a liberating redemption that permanently, because in *each present day*, unbinds the bindingness of fatal time.

This form of liberty—not just a *liberty with respect to* any one of several or even infinitely many determinate ends *within* historical time, but a *liberation from* the historical mode of temporality—conceives of humanity as destined for a freedom without limit, a freedom of perpetual recommencement, such that

[n]ot only the choice of destiny is free. The accomplished choice does not become a chain. Man conserves the possibility—supernatural, certainly, but graspable, concrete—of dissolving the contract by which he is freely engaged (QRPH 10/RPH 65).

Nothing is ultimately binding—not choice, nor even fate which is still reality. But it is a reality continually punctuated and undone by remorse and pardon, by the eucharist and

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<sup>29</sup> “L’homme se trouve dans le présent de quoi modifier, de quoi effacer le passé”: Seán Hand translates this phrase as “Man finds something in the present with which he can modify or erase the past.”

redemptive liberation. The struggle for pardon and redemption in repentance enables the human being to hold at bay (with the grace of God) what at first glance seems definitive (QRPH 11/RPH 66).<sup>30</sup> Such freedom is not abstract: it is only in the daily and present struggle for pardon, where the full weight of fate is felt, that liberation arises. Levinas very explicitly draws attention to this point, thereby drawing a sharp line against the possibility of interpreting the Christian notion of human destiny as freedom to be removed from concrete existence.<sup>31</sup> Abstraction is rather a power of a being destined concretely for freedom—it is possible thanks to the “power given to the soul to liberate itself from *what has been*” (QRPH 11/RPH 66).

Liberalism—broadly construed to include Marxism,<sup>32</sup> which has the virtue of recognizing the inextirpable link between thought and its determinately material conditions—tends to suspend the drama of redemption but it nevertheless retains a more limited and abstract notion of “the sovereign liberty of reason” (QRPH 12/RPH 66). The coincidence of liberalism and rationalism thus becomes clear. Liberalism does not involve the entirety of the person, referring instead to the rational dimension of the

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<sup>30</sup> Although Jewish thinking on precisely how pardon is achieved in relation to various sorts of transgressions is complex, and remains an open debate. See for example Tractate Yoma 85b-88a, in which the precise role of the various parties to offense and forgiveness, including God, is argued and questioned. See also *La conscience juive face à l'histoire: le pardon* (1965), which records the proceedings and readings at a colloquium of Jewish intellectuals. At this colloquium Levinas gave both a reading of a portion of Tractate Yoma (which was collected in English as “Toward the Other” in *Nine Talmudic Readings* [1990]), but also participated in the discussions of different lecturers on the topic of pardon and forgiveness within Jewish traditions.

<sup>31</sup> I take it that Levinas *minimally* means that Christianity, unlike the rationalism he had earlier portrayed, does not hypostasize a soul whose freedom is simply given insofar as it is rational and unaffected by feeling (i.e., is disembodied). Christianity does not understand human freedom to be a state of being in which we are (already or finally) disengaged and essentially unaffected by the world; salvation is a struggle because liberation is not simply given, and it is not affection one would be free of, but sinfulness.

<sup>32</sup> Again on this point see Delhez, “‘Kehre’ levinasienne,” 130-133.

person; it appears through a fixed difference between reason and reality. Despite this partiality, however, liberal reason maintains a certain, albeit limited, power to judge and refuse total determination by the real. Even Marxism, which represents a definite and obvious break from the idealism that had characterized the spiritual tradition derived from Greek philosophy and the religious life of Judaism and Christianity,<sup>33</sup> casts itself as a struggle for liberation, and so casts itself as and for a power over that which, in material life, is or should be definitive. Levinas argues that despite its innovative materialism, the possibility of becoming conscious of one's own condition represents "for Marx himself liberation from the fatalism that [the social situation] comports" (QRPH 15/RPH 67). That such a possibility is affirmed in the Marxist tradition marks it as a legitimate inheritor of the spirit of freedom that, in Levinas's view, found its fullest, most characteristic expression in Judaism and Christianity.

What is proper to the traditions constituted by the elementary feeling of absolute freedom is an orientation towards the unfree elements of our existence that places them at a distance from the human self. The affirmation of human freedom relegates these fateful elements to a rank other than "the destined," making of them merely possibilities, rather than definitive of our existence. The body, which for Judaism, Christianity, rationalism, and liberalism was felt as strange because unfree, was thus felt as the first, most intimate *object* (QRPH 15, 16/RPH 67, 68). But an object is, as the very word shows, thrown over against us—it implies a distance, and this distance marks it as not essential, as not bound up essentially to my destiny as a human being, i.e., as a free being despite all trials. A trial or an obstacle to my freedom is not impassable, after all: it is able to be overcome. An

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<sup>33</sup> QRPH 12-14/RPH 66-67.

obstacle's triumphs over us are purely contingent; our triumphs over it, however, represent a possibility that is constitutive of its very nature in relation to our own. If none of the traditions stemming from the elementary feeling of absolute freedom agrees substantively in *how* one may overcome this obstacle, they at least agree that the situation is not hopeless. We are for a destiny that lies within our power to achieve because it is by our very being-free that we achieve it.

On Levinas's account, Hitlerism distinguishes itself from every liberalism in that it feels the body as determinative (and all that is associated with the body as orienting, revelatory, depends upon this starting point). The privilege of the body to determine our destiny stems from the feeling of identity in which "all dualism between the self and the body must disappear" (QRPH 17/RPH 68). The body is not an object for Hitlerism—it is not something that I "have" as a free human spirit; I *am* my body. Is this a mere nonsense or contradiction? In support of such claims, Levinas has recourse here to the experience of physical pain, as making visible the peculiar bindingness that is bodily identity:

[I]n the impasse of physical pain, does not the sufferer feel the indivisible simplicity of his being when he is returned to his bed of suffering in order to find a position of peace? Will we say that the analysis reveals in pain the opposition of the spirit to this pain, a revolt, a refusal to remain there and consequently an attempt to go beyond it—but is not this attempt characterized as henceforth desperate? Does not the revolted spirit remain enclosed in pain, ineluctably? And is it not this despair that constitutes the very foundation of pain? (QRPH 17/RPH 68)

The revolt of the spirit or mind against the pain that is suffered in the flesh is here shown as reactionary and desperate. The aim of the spirit is to overcome pain, to affirm its freedom from the body-obstacle by putting at a distance bodily suffering. Yet it is incapable of setting pain at a distance—the very painfulness of pain is given in one's

despair of being utterly without the ability to take a distance from it.<sup>34</sup> Identity is this very collapse of every supposed distance—the body-as-object falling into the body-as-me, and being unable to become again at will the body-as-object—which is to say, since the body is an object only insofar as one can *at will* take it to be at a distance from *me*, the body has never been an object. It has always been me, and I am powerless to achieve in good faith a dualism of body and soul.

From this failure of dualism before the absoluteness of my being my body arises a new notion of humanity: “The biological with all that it brings of fatality becomes more than an *object* of spiritual life, it becomes the heart. [...] The essence of man is no longer in liberty, but in a kind of enchainment” (QRPH 18-19/RPH 68-69). If we were to speak of this claim in light of the real toward which elementary feeling orients us, Levinas would then be claiming that the temporality of bodily existing—the time of identity—is essentially fatal: the body is the absolute “*what has been*” from which I can take no distance in the present, save in a delusion. To be present or to present oneself is to presuppose the position of the body, which is not present to me as a way-marker that I can leave behind, but is present as that to which I am absolutely and irremissibly tied. This is what “enchainment” means.

Henceforth, the truth of my enchainment governs all other knowledge: the particularity of my bodily constitution, determines my access to truth; and the multiplicity of constitutions suggests that some may be irreparably nearer or farther from

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<sup>34</sup> For a brilliant analysis of physical pain that articulates this same point in much greater detail, see Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford University Press, 1985), 3-19, 27-59.

truth, better or worse able to know truth. Neither spirit nor reason can overcome bodily constitution, for the two are not independent entities, which leads Levinas to play on Voltaire's aphorism in the satirical, yet all too serious, conclusion, that "if race does not exist, one must invent it!" (QRPH 20/RPH 69) From the concept of race issues the notion that society must henceforth be a society of the like-minded, which like-mindedness is backed by the essential similarity of bodily constitution that permits access to a common, but racially particular, truth. On this view, liberal "mixed" societies that ignore the determinative power of the body, which lies in an identity from which there can be no distance without delusion, threaten the very notion of society and civilization itself by attempting to found community on a false conception of a common humanity (QRPH 21/RPH 70).

The political "contradiction" of Christianity and liberalism by Hitlerism, when thus reduced to its ontological origin, at last acquires its true signification for Levinas: it becomes comprehensible as the true scope and nature of the conflict becomes clear. Elementary feelings open alike onto the real of historical existence as a fatal existence, which real is revealed in and through bodily existing. They make visible the reason for the intransigence of liberal freedom opposed to racist fidelity to fate: the focus on feeling brings to light the common, bodily and temporal origin of Hitlerism and the liberal (in the most expansive sense) spiritual tradition of Europe.

*Quelques réflexions sur la philosophie de l'hitlérisme* marks an advance over Levinas's earlier, more neutral and relatively apolitical analysis in "On the understanding of the concept of spirituality in French and German culture" a year before. In the first

place, its transposition of the conflict between the rationalist and romantic-sentimental traditions into a conflict framed in the latter's terms allows Levinas to articulate a phenomenology of the body which contributes the link between a certain illiberal and un-Christian<sup>35</sup> destiny and identity. When identity as a tautological operation of reason is reduced to its concrete condition, namely the felt identity of self with body, i.e., the feeling of enchainment, Levinas finds that the bodiliness of concrete identity delivers us to fate and generates the problematic significance of physical pain, which will remain important to him throughout his career. His analyses of physical pain and suffering will exercise a constant and clearly perceptible influence on his future work, even when he attempts to displace the centrality of pain.<sup>36</sup>

Equally as important, the essay on Hitlerism implicitly poses the problem of the support of the dualism experienced in the Christian and liberal positions. The sentimental drama of Christianity and the derivative, reified difference of liberty-reason/world-force in liberalism lack the ontological support that Hitlerism has. It is clear from the phenomenological analysis of “the real” and of Hitlerism's feeling of enchainment what the seat of fatal temporality is: the body in its identifying mode of existing. But what phenomenon introduces the feeling of a gap between body and self or spirit? What

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<sup>35</sup> Also un-Jewish, but the prevailing focus on Christianity in *Quelques réflexions sur la philosophie de l'hitlérisme* merits framing the illiberality of the Nazi philosophy of the body under the aegis of Christianity. One might be so bold as to suggest that Nazi unfreedom is, on Levinas's reading, simply *irreligious*, insofar as it is a religious freedom that gives the paradigm for what it is to be humanly free.

<sup>36</sup> Compare, for example, the place of pain in Levinas's analyses of identification in *Totality and Infinity* and its place in *Otherwise Than Being*. Levinas dedicates only one article to a focused and sustained analysis of pain, “Useless Suffering” (1982), but this late article testifies to the continuing significance of pain as a phenomenon that poses a problem and a challenge to any phenomenology that purports to affirm the significance of freedom.

phenomenon or phenomenal structure could withstand the corrosive reduction of dualism to the monistic duality-without-dualism that physical pain both operates and reveals?

Levinas's 1934 analysis essentially repeats the (implicit, only half-acknowledged) results of his *Zauberberg* analysis a year earlier, but with this crucial difference:

Peeperkorn's victory appears now as non-accidental, if one adds to it the analyses of fate and freedom developed in *Quelques réflexions sur la philosophie de l'hitlérisme*.

Transposing the rationalist, Cartesian conception of "spirituality" or (in the terms of *Quelques réflexions sur la philosophie de l'hitlérisme*) human destiny into the sentimental and dramatic realm of concrete existence, within which phenomenology operates, makes clear both the radical promise of the fundamental feeling of religious life and the depth of its mystery with regard to the "hidden forces of being" that are revealed as the fatality of our existence. Here, "mystery" should not be understood in mystical or religious terms, but in the more worrisomely mundane sense of the incomprehensible that is suspected to lack support: if the feeling of enchainment proper to Hitlerism has as its "object" or noema the body's identity as locus of fatal temporality, then towards what concrete phenomenon does the feeling of absolute liberty orient us? What phenomenon could come prior to and transcend or challenge the experience of an absolute and irreducible bodily position?

Put so, the mysteriousness of the feeling of absolute liberty derives from its very existence: the powerlessness of both liberalism and the Judeo-Christian tradition in the face of Hitlerism, repeating the powerlessness of Settembrini and Naphta (and Ziemssen) before Peeperkorn, seems not to be an accident or mere perversion, but the result of the



lack of phenomenal support. What phenomenon could oppose and even undo the time of our embodiment as beings subjected to fatal time through absolute identity? How does one move from the absolute identity of self and body towards a renewed and robust “dualism” whereby I can be as at a distance from myself, and so have the authentic possibility of untying the temporal knot, or of having it untied? There would seem to be no possibility of maintaining a separate-but-equally-fundamental phenomenal support for the two elementary feelings, which amounts to questioning whether the feeling of liberty in fact could be rightly *opposed* to the feeling of enchainment as an *elementary* feeling. The “noematic” correlate of the feeling of liberty is, as it were, missing. The search for and elaboration of this “correlate,” which will prove not to be a correlate at all, strictly speaking, will occupy Levinas for the rest of his career.

On a final note, the publication of *Quelques réflexions sur la philosophie de l'hitlérisme* makes evident the political import of Levinas's analyses. If Levinas does not have a well-developed political philosophy, it is not the case that his philosophy is politically neutral. It is the need to analyze a particularly malign political formation that furnishes him with the direction his work will take, even when that political inspiration is submerged in the technical philosophical analyses that support his reading of the political situation. With this in mind, I turn to the last of Levinas's pre-war writings that will be analyzed in full for its ontological insights into the developing problem of being and the malign: *On Escape*.

### ***On Escape***

Levinas's 1935 essay, *On Escape*, shows a remarkable continuity and

development of themes brought to light in his earlier two works; at the same time, one finds an appreciable difference in tone and style. The notions of powerlessness, the temporality of the *fait accompli*, and especially the link between identity and being are present, as they were in previous writings, but here we find a more sustained phenomenological analysis of the constitution and relationships of these phenomena, one that supports the first developed argument against the prioritization of being in “traditional philosophy.” Previously, Levinas had been concerned to diagnose the rapidly unfolding crisis of European racial politics, but he had refrained from offering anything like a philosophically sustained polemic or a recommendation as to a cure for the ailing spirit of Europe.

*On Escape*, however, is polemical, arguing through the linked series of phenomenological analyses for a particular understanding of existence (being) and, by targeting the subject's constitution in relation to existence, for the first time suggests that a cure lies in the direction of “escape” from being itself, as the philosophical tradition has characterized it. It therefore represents a significant philosophical development for Levinas, one that lays out the direction of Levinas's mature thought. It does so by drawing into focus the results of previous studies, but without explicit reference to them or to those same underlying socio-political motivations so clearly at work in them. Therefore one of the first questions to ask is: what, precisely, is the relationship of this work to his earlier pieces, which pieces certainly provide the *impetus*, existential and political, to philosophize, but which do not succeed in offering as precise a diagnosis and analysis as Levinas gives in *On Escape*?

To answer this question, it will be necessary to follow the properly phenomenological analyses Levinas sets out in sections three through six of *On Escape* in order to allow the meaning of the term “existence” to appear,<sup>37</sup> for as Levinas implicitly acknowledges, it is not immediately obvious and has (he believes) largely been obscured in the history of philosophy by a confusion of existence with the existent. From this point, it emerges that with respect to his previous work, *On Escape* represents Levinas's first attempt to develop a fundamental ontology, i.e., at developing an analysis that allows the ontological difference between being and an individual being to appear.

#### Approaching Pure Existence: The Analysis of Need

Levinas's analysis in *On Escape* takes as its starting point need. Why need? Need is a phenomenon that has been used in traditional philosophy<sup>38</sup> to mark the difference between the being of a creature and the being of God, between imperfect and perfect

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<sup>37</sup> Guillaume Fagniez contends that Levinas's sense of existence in the 1930s and 1940s is worldly being: being-in-the-world, as exemplified in Heidegger's analyses, which Levinas the commentator finds to be the fulfillment of phenomenology's promise to return philosophical analysis to concretely lived life. Thus “being” (*être*) is understood to mean “to exist” (*exister*), with an emphasis on the way in which beings stand out or light up against the horizon of the world. I do not disagree with Fagniez that this is true of Levinas's commentaries during this period of time, but Levinas's more personal and original work, which does not present itself as commentary on Husserl or Heidegger, seems not as easily to fit with this claim, as we shall see. Cf. Fagniez, “En découvrant l'existence avec Emmanuel Lévinas,” *Studia Phaenomenologica: Romanian Journal for Phenomenology* 6 (2006): 171-187.

<sup>38</sup> What exactly counts as “traditional philosophy” is not wholly clear. At its most expansive, it is equivalent to “western philosophy” (DE 96/OE 51) which helps to the same degree that it hinders: everyone is included! Specifically, however, Levinas mentions the philosophy of Bergson (DE 97-98, 122/OE 54, 70), Rousseau (DE 91/OE 50), Parmenides (DE 124/OE 71), and especially Aristotle, whom Levinas cites as posing the essential questions of ontology that must be revisited (DE 99/OE 56) but also as having gained an essential insight into the nature of pleasure (DE 109/OE 62) (which puts Aristotle closer to Levinas's own position, in fact). Heidegger and the question of the meaning of being is present in the background, though his name never appears; and in various places, the terminology of creature and creator, of the distinction between being and that which is, of finite and infinite, perfect and imperfect, suggests an attempt to evoke the metaphysical tradition *in toto* from Plato through the Middle Ages (DE 97/OE 55-57, 100/69-71, 120-122, 125-126/ 55-57, 69-71, 72-73) He also mentions Byron and “the romantics”; as noted above, however, this reference is extremely unhelpful due to the generality of this term, but also because Levinas in earlier work associated romanticism with “German romanticism”, which is already difficult to pin down. Yet here in *On Escape* he cites only Byron and Rousseau.

being: it has helped to lay out, in other words, a certain kind of ontological difference.

Levinas, too, aims to elicit the structure of ontological difference, but to do so in such a way as to further his own investigation into a *problem* that being, as distinct from individual beings or existents, poses to us.

Within Levinas's own project, need is important not only because it is a phenomenon that has traditionally been a locus of difference between creatures and creator, between finite and infinite being, imperfect and perfect being, but because the way it manifests affectively is intrinsic to its capacity to allow being to appear as distinct from being. The combination of ontological difference and need's affective character will allow Levinas to argue eventually that the malign aspect of being that one can access through need is not due to any lack or privation of being in a being (DE 100-102 /OE 56-57).

But the analysis of need as an isolated phenomenon is not in itself sufficient to prove Levinas's thesis that need is *not* a privation of being: he will need to pass through a series of phenomena intrinsically linked to need in order to make his case. Indeed, the analysis of need is in fact ambiguous taken by itself. Thus need and its satisfaction in pleasure, its issuance in shame, and finally in nausea, as the paradigmatic appearance of being—these together form the complete analysis that enables Levinas to assert that need is not privation, that need rather expresses the fact that the accomplishment of existence is always self-sufficient just insofar as one is powerless with respect to one's constitution as existing.

### Need Is Not a Privation

To counter the weight of what Levinas calls a “psychological” account of need to which philosophical accounts of need have attended, Levinas focuses our attention not on the fact that the object of need is outside of us (and so we lack it, just because we are finite), but on the felt experience of need. Need presents itself most clearly when it is acute or “imperious”, and when it does, it shows itself as a particular kind of suffering: the suffering of “*malaise*” (DE 104/OE 58).<sup>39</sup>

“Malaise” Levinas defines as a dynamic state of being, which is felt as “a refusal to rest in place, as an effort to get out of an unbearable situation” (DE 104/OE 58, translation slightly modified).<sup>40</sup> Malaise is a restlessness with respect to the situation one is in, yet unlike other cases of restlessness, it does not include a determinate destination: in the desire to get out of malaise, to leave a state of need, no particular destination is given. This is why we only learn what we need, and education has the effect that it does, namely to refine to a greater and greater degree our sense of which objects can satisfy us and to what degree (DE 104-105/OE 58-59). What is primary in the specific suffering of need is *to leave this state of being*, coupled with the indeterminateness of the destination (anywhere but here!). This indeterminacy Levinas takes not as a defect or the result of a merely ontic or inauthentic mode of being, but as an essential and positive characteristic

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<sup>39</sup> The general trend in this essay is to take as paradigmatic the acute case of whatever phenomenon is being examined because it shows aspects of the phenomenon that are less obvious in less acute cases. Levinas understands the less acute cases as grounded in the more acute phenomenon and as taking their significance from it. So cases of mild hunger, for example, take their significance as need from hunger in its acute form, when we experience it as a suffering and not a mild disturbance.

<sup>40</sup> “Le malaise n'est pas un état purement passif et reposant sur lui-même. Le fait d'être mal à son aise est essentiellement dynamique. Il apparaît comme un refus de demeurer, comme un effort de sortir d'une situation intenable.”

of the suffering involved in need (DE 104/OE 58-59).

Levinas is aware that this account must seem suspicious, for in fact, we do seem to have a sense that need is related to its objects: after all, the specific need *hunger* is not satisfied by, say, sex, and *thirst* is not satisfied by a deep breath of air or by music; not just any end will do for any need, even when the need is “imperious.” Besides which, what has any of this to do with establishing that need, understood as malaise, shows us that need does not signify our finitude and our lack of being? To which Levinas replies: “The whole problem consists in knowing whether the fundamental preoccupation of need is here accounted for, whether the satisfaction of need responds precisely to the unquiet of malaise” (DE 105/OE 59, translation modified). In other words, granted it is obvious that need admits of satisfaction in certain phenomena which do correlate to specific needs, is the phenomenon of satisfaction *adequate* to the suffering of need? Is our understanding of need's suffering exhausted in understanding that need can be satisfied with a particular object or experience? Or have we missed something? Is there more in need's malaise than satisfaction through whatever object can account for?

Levinas contributes two further points for consideration, both aimed at justifying or even simply arousing the suspicion that we may have missed something in focusing on going towards an object in need: firstly, he notes that while a need that goes unsatisfied (does not find an object that can satisfy) can lead to death and that this is so obvious as to be absolutely incontestable, in and of itself, he claims, the experience of need does not announce the approach of an end-to-me. Rather, need is wholly preoccupied with announcing what is actual—namely, the need to leave this suffering state (with no 'or

else' included)—which need to depart then opens us to a future as possible departure, but not a departure understood as the annihilation of the self (as in death) (DE 105/OE 59).

This raises the question: if Levinas is right, then from what are we trying to depart? What actually makes us suffer in need if not the threat of non-being as a limitation of our being, and which non-being is forestallable only if we acquire certain objects of need?

Secondly, he notes that when we satisfy our needs, need is not actually destroyed: it recurs. If I am hungry and I eat bread, I will again hunger and turn towards bread (or some other more desired food that presents itself—there is no necessity in Levinas's account that it be bread or even food; one can eat dirt in desperation and feel somewhat satisfied, for example). This on again, off again nature of need Levinas interprets as the persistence of need as such, which persistence makes itself known in a cyclical return. This raises the question: given that the objects of need do satisfy need and enable us to rest for a little while, still—if need simply recurs because no satisfaction undoes need, is this rest, said to be given in satisfaction, the final end of need? Or is need's final end something else, and how might that 'something else' actually respond to need as a suffering? What exactly does need reveal?

At this point, Levinas is enabled to pass (with some proleptic comments) to the next stage of the analysis: “In order to justify our thesis, according to which need expresses the presence of our being and not its deficiency, it is necessary that we envisage the primordial phenomenon of the satisfaction of need: pleasure” (DE 107/OE 60). The analysis of need reveals that need itself points us towards the analysis of what (temporarily at least) satisfies need, which alone can allow us to judge the claims made in

the analysis of need-as-malaise.

When we aim at an object to satisfy our needs, we do not simply aim at it in order to put a stop to need and achieve an anesthetic or unexcited state of rest; nor is it the solidity or matter of the object of satisfaction that interests us. As Levinas notes with regard to the latter: “It is certainly not the materiality of the objects that will satisfy need that orients the one who suffers need” (DE 107/OE 60, translation modified). One does not seek bread for its being-matter; one seeks it because it answers need—it satisfies it. How? In what does bread's (or any other object's) satisfaction of need consist? What actually *satisfies* need, Levinas claims, is the pleasure that comes of whatever we engage in order to satisfy need. We want to use these objects, but our use of them is not neutrally instrumental. We do not use objects that can satisfy need in the way that we use, for instance, tools, which we wield indifferently with our whole interest going towards the end they enable us to achieve and not at all towards the tools being used.<sup>41</sup> The objects that can satisfy need present themselves to us differently, involve us in using them differently: “Satisfaction is accomplished in an atmosphere of fever and exaltation which permits us to say that need is a search for pleasure” (DE 107/OE 60). The objects that satisfy the malaise of need appear amid this fever and excitement and signify in light of it as occasions of pleasure. The “relief” that satiates need is not a simple cessation of painfulness, but a sense of *deliverance* that is itself a positive pleasure (DE 104, 108-

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<sup>41</sup> The rejoinder to Heidegger here is evident. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas will use this same distinction between a tool and that which occasions enjoyment (“an element”) to argue that Heidegger has missed a crucial and fundamental aspect of concrete existence in his reduction of thing-being from *Vorhandenheit* to *Zuhandenheit*. Cf. TeI 81-94/TI 109-121, especially 103-108/130-134 and 116-127/143-154.



109/OE 59, 61-62).<sup>42</sup>

What is pleasure, then? Pleasure is not something added onto the satisfaction of need, but a dynamism in which need, whatever its specific object, “glimpses escape” (DE 109/OE 62). It is not an object in the usual sense of that term, nor is it a simple state of being that comes to pass: “Pleasure appears in developing itself. It is not there in its entirety, nor right away. And furthermore, it will never be completely given” (DE 107/DE 61). Pleasure does not appear as a whole, and so as an accomplished state of being in which I inhere and rest: it is rather a movement characterized by progressive self-amplification which we experience as “the rarefaction of our being [*être*], as its swooning” (DE 108/OE 61 translation slightly modified). As pleasure amplifies itself, we experience a “lightening” or a draining away of our being, and this being does not in any way resist: indeed, a being “hurls itself” into this movement of pleasure that reduces its being to a progressive evanescence (DE 108/OE 61).

Because pleasure is an intensity only, and one that seeks to surpass itself in each moment, it is not actually seeking to come to an end in any object or “term”—its entire reality is this self-amplifying movement away from whatever weighs us down in suffering. What weighs is our being itself, which presents itself in suffering as suffocatingly present or rather, as suffocating presence; thus pleasure, which responds to this presence by drawing us away from the very being that is still mine by “lightening” it,

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<sup>42</sup> Again, this seems to be what Levinas implicitly is saying, otherwise the account does not hold together. For if one can simply say that what happens in the relief from suffering is a simple neutralization of feeling, a simple “anesthetic lancing” of suffering, as it were, rather than that anesthesia itself is experienced as positive pleasure, then Levinas cannot assert that pleasure, as he describes it, is what need aims at. There is nothing in the text that suggests he does not mean for us to infer that the movement to an anesthetic state (which we might think of as the most common way for suffering to end) is positive pleasure, therefore I think we can justifiably attribute this view to Levinas.

is a kind of ecstasy, a getting outside of my being. This is the “escape” that pleasure promises, and towards which malaise actually turns us: pleasure is not a discrete object we pursue or a restful state of being, but a movement oriented away from being, and whose unfolding self-amplification is itself a way out of being (DE 109-110/OE 61-62).

But the escape fails: Levinas does not offer an explanation in terms of causes, but seems simply to rely on the common experience of the fleetingness of pleasure. Although pleasure does not go after a term, and in fact seeks a sort of limitless self-amplification, it nevertheless comes to a term by ceasing. We sink back into ourselves and into our being, which, in due time, will begin to make its presence felt in suffering again. Pleasure ends in disappointment because although it does address malaise at the appropriate level—by affecting the being that appears to us (or rather, that intrudes on us) in suffering need—it does not cut the knot between the self that goes towards a certain evanescence, where “I” am paradoxically most at home with myself in all my excitement and exaltation, and the existing of the self that stirs in malaise (DE 110/OE 63).

The disappointment issuing from pleasure also takes, Levinas thinks, a particular form: that of shame, though not a moral shame (DE 112/OE 63).<sup>43</sup> As a return from a kind of no place because beyond the being to which the dimension of space belongs, disappointment returns me to “being-there”: to standing out and visibility. I am aware of my being again: I experience it as present to me, and in such a way that I am unable to distance myself from it, to overlook it. Levinas writes: “Shame appears each time that we

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<sup>43</sup> Among other reasons, moral shame Levinas here thinks of as belonging to a subject who can act because fully constituted and voluntary. But pleasure affects the self by altering its constitution: the enjoying self is not a completely constituted subject; therefore its shame cannot be a moral shame.

do not succeed in causing our nudity to be forgotten. It is a relation to all that which we would like to hide, but cannot” (DE 112/OE 63, translation modified).<sup>44</sup> What is nude here is not my body,<sup>45</sup> but the unbreachable bond between me and my existing in an identification I cannot fail to make. Yet in this unavoidable identification, I am nevertheless not at home with myself. I am at home with myself rather to the degree to which my being does *not* present itself to me, to the degree that this knot of identification is successfully “clothed.” Shame, ontologically interpreted, has to do with, as it were, “bad clothing” that draws attention to that which it dis-covers precisely by covering *badly*:

The timid man, who does not know what to do with his arms and his legs, is incapable finally of covering the nudity of his physical presence with his moral person. Poverty is not a vice, but it is shameful because, like the rags of the beggar, it shows up [*transparaître*] the nakedness of an existence that is incapable of hiding itself. [...] The whistle that Charlie Chaplin swallows in “The City Lights” triggers the scandal of the brutal presence of his being; it works like the recording device that betrays [*permet de déceler*] the discrete manifestations of a presence that Charlie's legendary tramp costume barely dissimulates (DE 112-113/OE 64-65).

What these examples show is that to the degree that my being appears to me, it appears as

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<sup>44</sup> “La honte apparaît chaque fois que nous n'arrivons pas à faire oublier notre nudité. Elle a rapport à tout ce que l'on voudrait cacher et que l'on ne peut pas enfouir.” For some reason, the English translation inserts “make others forget,” although this is not in the text, and in fact goes counter to Levinas's insistence that shame is not primarily a social phenomenon but first concerns me insofar as I am unable to forget (because unable to hide from myself) that I exist.

<sup>45</sup> A naked body need not be cause for shame: Levinas notes that a boxer or a dancer who displays himself or herself can be naked but without shame because of the mode of their relationship to the body that they display. They have a distance towards their bodies that permit their bodies to appear to them not as a betrayal of the presence of their being but as a dealing with objects to which they have only a contingent attachment (DE 113-114/OE 65). The body in this mode does not affect them with a sense of the presence of their being to themselves or to others. Nevertheless, when I *do* feel ontological shame in relation to my body, Levinas writes that “The shameful manifestations of our bodies compromise us in a manner totally different than does the lie or dishonesty. The fault consists not in the lack of propriety but almost in the very fact of having a body, of being there” (DE 117/OE 67).

an intimacy of me with my existing, where that intimacy stands out grossly as that which I must hide first of all from myself. “It is [...] our intimacy, that is, our presence to ourselves, that is shameful,” Levinas writes (DE 114/OE 65). The intimacy of my being with me goes to the point of confusing me with my existing, but this sense of not being at home with my own presence betrays a duality to my identity, which exposes ontological difference. I am, and I both am and am not my being, but the “am not” side of this 'equation' does not indicate that I am bound to a discrete object that I can put at a distance and manipulate. I cannot externalize my existing by an act of production; I cannot cut it off or out of me—it *is* me. But it is somehow still distinct from me, which is what my not-being-at-home with it manifests. Existing, as different from the existent, manifests as an intimate difference within my own identity: as a me-over-against-my-existing in the experience of malaise.<sup>46</sup> Malaise is, it turns out, the mode by which ontological difference manifests, yet malaise is also the experience of my absolute identification with my being. The difference of existence and existent manifests in the intimacy of my being

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<sup>46</sup> Why is this not, then, a simple recommendation to commit suicide as a solution to our problem? Levinas addresses this point more explicitly in *De l'existence à l'existent*, when he has had the chance to develop the phenomenology of *il y a*. Basically, suicide does not eliminate being—it eliminates *me*. It does not untie the knot that binds me to existing, it cuts it: I am no longer there, but being remains in the transformed corpse, as secure in its self-sufficient positing as ever. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas will argue against suicide as an option because it eliminates the possibility of enjoyment, which is what we want (at least insofar as we have not yet been faced by the other person, who enables me to discover other aims and ends, other values beyond my own persistence in enjoyment). Macbeth, he says there, is the paradigm of suicide's despairing disappointment: “Suicide is tragic, for death does not bring a resolution to all the problems to which birth gave rise, and is powerless to humiliate the values of the earth—whence Macbeth's final cry in confronting death, defeated because the universe is not destroyed at the same time as his life” (Tel 119/TI 146). Suicide, in other words, doesn't bring down being at the same time that it ends the one who suicides; it simply signifies my despairing love for the enjoyment (“the values of the earth”) that different objects occasion. Pleasure is, in fact, more radical than suicide—at least it takes aim at existence itself, while seeking my liberation from it without thereby destroying the “I” who enjoys, and whose nature remains unclear until the Other intervenes to give us a way of understanding a 'beyond being' that is not an annihilation or nothingness.

myself, beyond any choice or action or capacity of mine. I am involved in being, which effects and identifies me with and to myself, yet *without involving the I that can act at the level of will or power*.

Shame, Levinas concludes, in which ontological difference manifests itself to us, “reveals not our nothingness but rather the totality of our existence. [...] What shame discovers is the being who is *uncovered*” (DE 114/OE 65, translation modified).<sup>47</sup> That I am bound to my existing—a point which becomes acutely evident in suffering, when try though I might, there is nothing I can do to take a distance from my being—manifests the difference between myself as an existent and my existing in the moment when I am most bound to myself, when my identity is *least* in question: when I *have to be as being-suffering*, when I cannot feel myself at home in my existence, then existence makes itself felt as distinct from me even as it identifies me with my suffering being without remission or escape. When I feel my powerlessness not *before* my being, but *as* existing, then my very identity, as *being* myself, reveals itself to be structured by ontological difference.

This is what comes to the fore with particular acuity in the analysis of nausea, which issues from previous analyses not as a new phenomenon per se, but as the instance of malaise par excellence (DE 115-119/OE 66-68): nausea reveals the structure of

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<sup>47</sup> “Ce que la honte découvre c’est l’être qui se *découvre*.” The English translation reads “who *uncovers* himself [*se découvre*]”, with the French verb given in brackets. Clearly, there is a typographical error in the emphasis, even though the accent is properly put on the “uncovers” rather than on “himself”. However, while “se découvrir” is a reflexive verb that can mean “to undress oneself”, “to expose oneself” or “to understand oneself” (clearly useful for its Heideggerian association), I think in this case it might be better to try to read the verb as a passive construction (“is *uncovered*”). Agency is largely irrelevant for the whole discussion of shame, need, and nausea, and where it enters in, it is ambiguous at best: is it the agent I who acts, or the existing that constitutes my being-as-identity? The passive construction better suits the de-emphasis on the I’s agency than does the standard reflexive verbal construction.

malaise in its most intense, original form. It demonstrates both the intimacy of my bond to being, as well as my powerlessness with regard to being. In nausea, where I feel absolutely sunk in and enclosed within myself as nauseated, I seek deliverance through vomiting. But I do not so much cause myself to vomit as I am induced to vomit when nausea reaches a certain level of acuity. Before I vomit, however, before I *am enabled* to vomit, I am restless with the need to escape the state of nausea, where what is overwhelmingly present is my absolute impotence *not to be* nauseated, *not* to be the being that nauseates (DE 118/OE 68). Moreover, the 'sui generis' character of nausea (DE 115-116/OE 66-67) signifies nothing but the fact of my own impotence with respect to it, for its presence is fundamentally revolting only insofar as I am incapable of distancing myself from it (DE 118/OE 68). Nausea, as it were, *approaches me*; I do not approach it: it *happens* to me without involving my will or agency or decision. The “duality” of me with respect to my being, which nauseates without being the effect or enactment of my will, and without being an externalizable something (I *am* nauseated because my existing as myself *nauseates* me), is a duality that comes with the very accomplishment of my identification with and as myself (DE 98/OE 55). Nausea affects me not as an obstacle or enemy approaching from without, and whose inevitability would be happenstance (DE 115/OE 66). The duality of identification that occurs as nausea essentially blocks all escape from being-as-nauseating: approaching of itself from 'within', nausea plunges me into a relationship with myself in which it becomes evident that if nausea did not affect my being, were not a mode of being me, and yet one that exceeds my will or power to effect, it would not be at all. Yet nausea happens to me, alters my being, and it stains

every objective or external relationship (DE 115/OE 66), which leaves me bound to a nauseating existence without recourse because without escape, save to vomit—but such relief is not strictly within my power.

Thus nausea manifests ontological difference through the very structure of an identification, where I am grossly, intrusively, and intimately present to myself just because I am absolutely impotent not to be myself (DE 118-119/OE 68). In the grip of nausea, in relation to which I am impotent, I feel ontological difference inasmuch as I do not feel at home with my being, with myself as being-myself. I feel at home, rather, to the degree that my intimacy with my own existence is not noticeable to me, or is “clothed.” Then ontological difference does not manifest.

Worldly modes of being, we infer from Levinas's account, in fact act as covering or “clothing” for my being-as-identified-with-my-existence. I need to have a certain kind of distance from my being in order for me to feel at home with myself; when my existence becomes present to me, which occurs as the very phenomenon of malaise, then worldly being collapses and my *being-there* functions as a mode of betrayal of my intimacy rather than a mode of ecstatic transcendence of this intimacy, in which I experience my freedom.

Therefore, Levinas writes that

[e]xistence is an absolute that is asserted without reference to anything else. It is identity. But in this reference to oneself, man perceives a type of duality. His identity with himself [...] takes on a dramatic form [...]. 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 (DE 98/OE 55).

That existing is “absolute” means that its enactment, or better, accomplishment is in *every*

case “self-sufficient,” showing no dependence on or reference to anything else—to be is to be in every case *me* (or whatever existent is under consideration). That I am or that it is, is always a “perfect” achievement, regardless of the kind or mode of being that is asserted and sustained (DE 101/OE 57).<sup>48</sup>

Moreover, although we gain access to being as distinct from me through suffering, the escape from existing sought by the human being who is, is *not* an escape into one of “innumerable lives” (DE 98/OE 55). Such an escape presupposes an agent concerned to manipulate effects, to keep choices open, but Levinas's account of existing has already put this presupposition in question. It is in fact *because* existence problematizes and dissociates itself from agency and power, because existence effects every identity, that escape is sought. For suppose that the agent *were* to desire to escape into an unrestricted, ever renewable choice of lives: on Levinas's account, existing as any of these hypothetically innumerable lives would be just as binding, just as much vulnerable to coming to light in shame or need or nausea or painfulness.<sup>49</sup> An escape sought through multiplying the possibilities to transform one's identity would in no way deal with the ontological bindingness involved in identification.

The bindingness of being, or its *enchainment*, can perhaps be better grasped through another metaphor that Levinas deploys: that of “weight.” Existence as different from the existent manifests like weight, specifically like a “dead weight”: weight is not a

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<sup>48</sup> This is why, in section one, where self-sufficiency first arises as a theme, Levinas does not need any examples of infinite being; the many beings around us that we take as objects suffice, in relation to us, to demonstrate that existing is somehow connected with self-sufficiency.

<sup>49</sup> Painfulness and sickness are the two conditions that Levinas analyzes in *Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism* in order to access what it is that racism is attuned to, and which are as precursors to his analyses here of need, shame, and nausea. Cf. QRP 17-19/RPH 68-69.



quantity so much as it is my feeling gravity, as it were: my feeling “something” (which is not a thing) in my depths that weighs me down, and holds me in place (DE 106/OE 60). Enchainment is another way of saying this holding-in-place, considered not in terms of a drawing down, but in terms of a kind of essential being-stuck-to. That existence is identity, or the enchainment that identifies and inaugurates a being in its existing as being-however-it-is—this makes it, Levinas says, extremely difficult to “distinguish in the being [the existent] that which accepts the weight [of being] and this weight itself” (DE 122/OE 70). Consequently, Levinas thinks, most of the philosophical tradition has failed to make the distinction between the bearer of the weight of being and the weight of being itself, and so has failed to grasp the fundamental ontological motivation of existents, namely the motive *to escape*.<sup>50</sup>

From the very beginning, Levinas stresses that it is the *fact* of being that existence signifies and “operates.” The facticity of existing is its self-assertion, its being without our having anything to do with the coming-to-be of a being (its “*sui generis*” character, as he said when analyzing nausea), and this self-sufficient self-assertion is the very structure of identity that makes an existent exist: “[T]his 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” (DE 93/OE 50-51). This first “image” of being that we find in worldly things is not, for Levinas, misleading, but it steers us towards the discovery of

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<sup>50</sup> The difficulty of distinguishing existence from the existent, in order to analyze the former, will continue to occupy Levinas throughout the forties; not until 1946 does he arrive at a way of accessing this difference that seems promising to him. See chapter two of the present work.

existence as identifying beings, binding them to be as they are. Existing is not essentially linked to the will—to me—in this account—quite the contrary, which is why the I experiences it as that which is both inevitable and unbearable when it “appears,” or rather, is felt.

### A Brief Methodological Exposition

While this essential detachment from the will does not make existence a neutral, reified “entity” or logical category or a concept, the difficulty of giving a positive description of existence as it manifests in ontological difference—indeed, the difficulty of securing ontological difference in the first place—will continue to occupy Levinas throughout the forties; not until 1946 does he arrive at a way of accessing this difference that seems promising to him.<sup>51</sup> But before we turn to an analysis of his first post-war ontology, it will be helpful to examine the methodology at work in *On Escape*, since Levinas, as we shall see, consistently bases his claim to be doing phenomenology on his appropriation of phenomenological method.

We have seen that the phenomenological analyses of *On Escape* are not a set of separate analyses, but an intrinsically linked series with polemical import. The argument over the ontological structure of need and its significance is not simply one extended analysis among others, but the point of departure for Levinas's contestation of the philosophical tradition's meditation on the nature of being. This departure has two main elements, which intertwine: (1) that the distinction between infinite and finite being does not give us an ontologically significant distinction by which to understand need, the

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<sup>51</sup> See chapter two of the present work.

moment in which ontological difference manifests,<sup>52</sup> and (2) that the demonstration of this point will show that existence-as-presence, which is revealed in a phenomenon (need) traditionally understood to support the claim that finite/infinite is an ontologically significant distinction, has something repulsive or malign about it that is independent of that traditional distinction.

How does Levinas justify his conclusion? That is, what do the analyses presuppose methodologically in order to function as a proof? That being has something malign about it is, I think, evident from the analyses, and needs no further proof nor, at this moment, a special discussion of method. But how does the chain of analysis support the attack on the characterization of being as either finite or infinite? Levinas's phenomenology of the existential sense of "to be" approaches the phenomenon of pure existing in order to show that there is no way of characterizing the fact of existing as more or less perfect. That is, he argues that the "to be" in the fact of existing or of its "being posited" (DE 100-101/OE 57) cannot take the predicate "imperfect," where "imperfect" signifies a lack of reality or fullness of being. Traditionally the perfection of the real of real being (the infinite) implied the fullness of being, while imperfection (the finite) implied a lack of being conceived as a limitation on the fullness of infinite being (DE 103/OE 58).<sup>53</sup> Need was the phenomenon in which the lack of being of a being

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<sup>52</sup> For the traditional account, on Levinas's reading, can only understand need as privative, and the evil of being that appears in need as a privative phenomenon, rather than giving a non-privative or positive account of being and the evil of being. To accomplish the latter, as we saw, depends on being able to articulate evil in terms of the positive *presence* of being, which in turn depends upon our capacity adequately to distinguish being from a being.

<sup>53</sup> Whether this characterization is historically accurate in every case is a different question. Levinas does not undertake a historical study; he simply gives his interpretation of the significance of the difference between finite/infinite in traditional philosophy. On the meaning of "infinite" in Levinas, and on this

appeared. Thus if Levinas can undermine the applicability of the term “imperfect” to being, by showing that need is not a lack of being that stands in relation to infinite being as a limitation, then he has a basis from which to conclude that existence does not admit of being split into the registers of infinite and finite, to which “perfect” and “imperfect” would correlate in a hierarchical manner.

In arguing for the dissolution of this ontological schema, construed in terms of progressive limitation of existential perfection, Levinas follows what he understands to be a basic methodological commitment of phenomenology:

The phenomenological description seeks the signification of the finite in the finite itself, in such a way that the imperfections of knowledge, instead of passing beside the object aimed at [*visé*], precisely define it. Whence the particular style of description. Each time that the classical philosopher insists on the imperfection of a phenomenon of knowledge, phenomenology is not content with the included negation in that imperfection, but poses this negation as constitutive of the phenomenon.<sup>54</sup>

We should not be confused by the language into thinking Levinas is making a merely epistemological claim, here. He is claiming that what *had* been taken for a defect of knowledge (limit or finitude read as imperfections in relation to an infinite) in fact belongs ontologically to the phenomenon and its relationship with the knower. If existence as such can be uncovered as and in a distinct phenomenon, then it must show itself to be either finite or infinite, but this will not be established by calling limits “imperfections.” That kind of comparative or relative meaning, which implies a presupposed acceptance of the notion that one ‘derives’ the nature and meaning of finitude

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apparent opposition of infinite and finite, more will be said in the next section.

<sup>54</sup> Levinas, “De la description à l’existence” in EDE 92-93. Levinas will later repeat himself nearly word for word in *Réflexions sur la “technique” phénoménologique* (1959) in EDE 113-115/DEH 93-95.

by applying a limit to an already established infinite that would be limitless and so perfect, has no place in phenomenology unless phenomenology can establish it phenomenologically. It cannot be simply presupposed or given through a logical deduction.

Without that coordination between finite and infinite, imperfection and perfection, limit and limitlessness of presence, such that the former take their meaning and structure from the latter, and the finite correlates with limitation and imperfection, while the infinite correlates with perfection and the absence of limitation, existence in Levinas's analysis appears as upsetting the traditional hierarchy. The presence of being shows itself in need as powerlessness, which should mean, according to traditional ontologies, imperfection and limitation that correlate with the finitude of a being's being, and yet the phenomenological ontology of the needy being that Levinas has developed does not show such a correlation between imperfection, limitation, and finitude. "The experience that reveals to us the presence of being as such [i.e., need]," Levinas writes,

the pure existence of being, is an experience of its powerlessness, the source of all need. That powerlessness therefore appears neither as a limit to being nor as the expression of a finite being. The "imperfection" of being does not appear as identical to its limitation. Being is "imperfect" inasmuch as it is being, and not inasmuch as it is finite. If, by the finitude of being, we understand the fact that it is a burden to itself and that it aspires to escape, then the notion of finite being is a tautology. Being is thus essentially finite" (DE 120/OE 69).

Levinas finds that imperfection is not given as a limit to perfection, as the difference between finitude and infinity; it is rather that the perfect sufficiency of pure existing in *any* being has as its ground an absolute powerlessness that is constitutive of the being's identity and of existing distinct from an existent as such. The perfection of being comes

about as its opposite, as the effectuation of a being powerless in relation to its being. “To be” therefore escapes comparison with, or deduction from, some perfect form of identification that would be without limit or manifest as a fullness of power of a being with respect to its being.<sup>55</sup>

For this same reason, Levinas cannot (and does not) simply characterize being as finite, where “finite” retains the meaning of “limited.” Rather, he must be able to articulate a meaning and structure for this term outside of the notion of limit. In developing a reduction that frees up a meaning of the finite from the finite, Levinas again follows what he understands to be integral to phenomenological method:

The argument does not result in a thesis having a signification independent of the description that the thesis summarizes. [...] The conclusion summarizes. It does not result in a superior truth, as in the scholastic and Cartesian proofs—or even as with Kant, in the *Refutation of Idealism*, for example, by combining a rational principle with a given.”<sup>56</sup>

At the level of the phenomenon, beyond which phenomenological explanation does not rise,<sup>57</sup> what Levinas's analyses show is that that need is not neutral: it is a movement *away* from what weighs and is burdensome (existence). This repulsive burdensomeness is an essential aspect of the appearing of pure existing as distinct from the existent, and cannot be discarded as an extrinsic factor to being. But what oppresses, what burdens

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<sup>55</sup> Those intimately acquainted with the mainline of pre-modern ontologies will argue that Levinas has gone astray in his criticism of pre-modern ontologies, insofar as pre-modern ontologies have generally claimed that (a) perfect being is the being of God, who is not *a being*, and (b) whose identity is therefore not articulable as ontological difference (or perhaps better: the identity of perfect being *is not articulable at all*, but absolutely simple). This, I think, is a point of irreconcilable difference between Levinas and some of the great metaphysicians of the philosophical tradition, as it developed in the wake of Plato and Aristotle.

<sup>56</sup> Levinas, “De la description à l'existence,” in EDE 92.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

such that it inspires the drive to escape is not the *limitation* of being, but the self-sufficiency and fullness of the existence as being-present—and this fullness and perfection of being betrays itself, on Levinas's reading, as signifying what had been called “finite” in the past. Existence is “finite” insofar as it weighs because it knows no transcendence of its burdensomeness, and so is, in this sense “essentially finite” (DE 120/OE 69).

Thus the meaning of the finitude of existence, as drawn from itself, has been displaced from the logical realm where it is grasped as limitation (not applicable with respect to the sufficiency of existence's identifying beings) to an affective dimension: burdensomeness that emerges from the bindingness of the terms of ontological difference, which existing effects. Imperfection likewise does not refer to limitation but to a fundamental and unsurpassable powerlessness that constitutes my relation as an existent to my existing. Infinitude has not appeared at all as having any role to play in the constitution of the phenomenon of existing in these analyses. This perhaps does not mean that “infinite” *cannot* be meaningfully posited of “to be,” but Levinas's 1935 analyses give us no ground to do so.

Finally, given that Levinas is close to both Husserl and Heidegger, even if he is also critical of them both, and of Heidegger especially, one notes that methodologically, Levinas has yet to grapple with temporality effectively. It may be implied that the presence of being articulates temporally as the present, but this is not certain. As Levinas develops his thinking of ontological difference and the need for escape from a malignity or evil of being, time will increasingly come to be important to his work. At this stage of

his thinking, however, time-analysis of both ontological difference and of escape remain largely undeveloped.

### Conclusions

From its first pages, it is clear that *On Escape* is the story of a philosophical revolt—a revolt of philosophy against previous philosophy, yet not in the manner of taking traditional philosophy as a simple opponent or enemy. Traditional philosophy is rather an inadequate response to what fundamentally drives us to revolt, namely being. Thus the conflict that emerges in this essay has rather a salvific character to it, which arises from engaging the ontologically differenced structure of identity, by which any existent exists: philosophy must, as every human enterprise must, free itself from itself in its own enslavement to being. This liberation is revolutionary: being had itself been thought to show the way to freedom, but if it is not, then the “ideal of happiness and dignity” that had been attached to earlier philosophical ontology must now be taken up and questioned anew (DE 99/OE 56). Levinas's work is a *radical* revolt insofar as it does not seek simply to destroy what has hitherto characterized philosophy, but to save the philosophical questions that have mattered by uncovering their real and concrete roots (DE 95-96/OE 53).<sup>58</sup>

As we have seen, the question of the freedom of the human being has been at issue throughout Levinas's early works. Yet this freedom is not primarily political, despite its arising in the context of Levinas's response to political oppression. Ontological

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<sup>58</sup> Of the themes and ideas that have formed a central part of philosophy, such as freedom from blind mechanism and bodily impulse, from the destruction of personality, and from authoritarian and false social structures, Levinas writes: “All these motifs are but variations on a theme whose depth they are incapable of equaling.”



difference, which gives access to being and the evil of being, comes to light not in explicitly socio-political structures but in affective states which socio-political structures and actions may effect or exacerbate. These affective states, however, are accessed through phenomenological ontology. And the “solution” to the evil with which it afflicts us—a powerlessness that smothers and delivers us to a kind of anti-meaningful suffering by virtue of its very sufficiency beyond any notion of limitation—is not given directly as a political program. In *Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism*, Levinas's aligns existence with fate—identity, that by which I am and which I am is a kind of fate insofar as it is “irreparable.” What is, is not within my power to undo or redo or eliminate, but is absolutely binding—it is, and I am that which makes me suffer. The link between fate and identity or “character” is an old one, and though Levinas does not directly invoke it, one cannot help but notice a certain congruency. The response to fate is either submission or liberation—and Levinas, in articulating the need for escape, throws his lot in with those traditions that seek liberation. What are those traditions? Judaism, Christianity—the religious traditions whence come the derivative traditions of liberalism in political and rationalist forms. We will see this constellation—identity, existence, evil, irreparability, anti-meaning, and liberation—recur in later works, and it will be the task of this dissertation to try to determine whether it gives us the key to Levinas's treatment of being and ontology. For now, what we have, after investigation, is a framework and an orientation which should alert us to the need to consider carefully the character of Levinas's endeavor: though liberty and freedom are often heavily critiqued, *liberation* as a salvation from being, is absolutely essential to his endeavors, and this liberation is not

obviously political first and foremost. Nor is it necessarily ethical in the sense of a bounded, discrete and rational discipline of norms and norm-formation: it is religious in character, or at least, it is religious freedom—from evil, from the unpardonable because irreparable past—that provides the paradigmatic type of liberation.

With this in mind, I turn now to the next chapter, and to analysis of *From Existence to Existents*, where existence as exposed in ontological difference gains a lasting name: *il y a*.

## CHAPTER TWO

### ONTOLOGICAL HESITATIONS

#### Introduction

In Chapter One, we saw that Levinas's pre-war investigations into the malignity of being responded to the intolerable political and philosophical situation in which he found himself increasingly embroiled. The results, culminating in the attempt to articulate a fundamental ontology in *On Escape*, were ominous.

For having analyzed the prevailing political contraries and reduced them to two opposed fundamental sentiments—racism's feeling of enchainment and a general anti-racist feeling of freedom—Levinas discovered that the feeling of enchainment could be traced to the relationship of the “I” to its bodily existing. This relationship lay at the heart of identification, and became tangible as a distinction that operated an identification in the experience of physical suffering. For in suffering, the relationship of myself to my bodily existing was revealed as a bondage, as the two terms of the distinction, me and my existing, working against each other, without existing being tractable at all to any power or freedom of my personality. Bodily suffering made tangible what Levinas later, in *On Escape*, would work out in more detail: ontological difference, which is felt as a difference between me and my existence because my bodily existing was against me.

At the same time, Levinas was finding it difficult to analyze “liberalism's” feeling of freedom within the terms of ontological difference: although he analyzed pardon and

redemption, and pleasure especially, and discovered in the former the paradigmatic *significance* of freedom from the bond to existence, he was not able to articulate this significance positively within the duality of an existent and its existing or existence. The pleasure analysis in particular made clear the difficulty of conceiving of an escape from the relationship of existent and existence that would leave the existent intact as personality. He could find only a negative relationship between the feeling of freedom and the body: the body felt like an obstacle, yet what ontological relationship sustained the existent within a feeling of freedom remained disturbingly elusive, and seemed likely to be derivative with respect to the existence-existent relationship.

From the failure of the analysis of the feeling of freedom and of pleasure as an attempt at escape emerged the sense that existence, when it “appears” (as it were, or becomes tangible, sensible), always appears as malign, as an evil of being for its being against the personality of a person, i.e., his or her “I” and sense of self as being at home within identification. Otherwise, being does not “appear” as distinct from a being, save cognitively as a logical distinction. But for a phenomenological ontology, a logical distinction in the classical sense of the term “logic” is itself an intentional relationship to be analyzed, not the irreducible ground of analysis.

How to interpret the results of these analyses? Did they mean that being was malign? That ontology, as the study of the relationships that hold within the difference of an individual existent and its existence, of a being and its being, could not give a positive articulation of goodness? Was it possible even to find a positive ontological structure for

benignity and goodness, as escaping the malignity that seemed inevitably to attend the “appearance” to the existent of existence as distinct from the existent? And if this were true, then would phenomenological *ontology*, as ontological inquiry, be adequate to the task of analyzing the structure and sense of escape, goodness, or benignity? Or could it only lead to further descriptions of the positive modes of enchainment, i.e., evil, of being?

In the present chapter, which is dedicated to Levinas's two major post-war works, *From existence to the existent* (1947) and *Time and the Other* (1948), my aim will be to show that Levinas has already begun to see the implications of his pre-war work as leading to the conclusion that an ontological reduction can only lead us to the sense of evil. What I shall call the “fatal ontology” of the 1940s,<sup>1</sup> which the development of the description of *il y a* helps to sketch, emerges out of his efforts to articulate ontological difference of being *in general* (DEE 16-18/EE 2-3).<sup>2</sup> However, he has not yet determined what other mode of inquiry might enable a successful reduction of goodness to its sense, or whether he can alter the character of phenomenological inquiry to avoid or exceed its ontological dimension.

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<sup>1</sup> For several reasons: among them, that Levinas himself will speak of the fatality of being in various places in his early work, e.g. DE 95/OE 71; DEE 101/EE 57, 171/104; TA 29/TO 50-51. For another, that this terminology can be related to the notion of the *fait accompli* (QRPH 10/RPH 65), which describes on the one hand the facticity of existence (already perfectly accomplished), and on the other hand the way in which a fact, which is, to use the language of *Reflections on Hitlerism*, “irreparable,” weighs like fate, which is precisely that to which one is submitted without recourse. Being is, in that sense, *fatal* or “fateful.”

<sup>2</sup> Levinas had already begun to broaden his investigation of being in *On Escape*. Although his 1935 article primarily devotes attention to eliciting a non-privative notion of the malignity of being, the reader notes that he begins from the facticity of *things* to illustrate the perfection of existence that he seeks (DE 93/OE 50-51), and then proceeds to the analysis of human affect. By starting with things, and by taking their facticity as a starting point for his inquiry, even though he swiftly leaves it behind and never returns to it, Levinas suggests that the existence of things and the existence of human subjectivity *does* have something in common, namely the perfect accomplishment in every instance of being.

I wish to argue that emerging from the war, between 1946 and 1951, Levinas enters a period of hesitation over the character of his philosophical method, and the precise dimensions of his problematic, although certain terms and phenomena, gleaned from earlier research, remain constantly in view. In his work in the 1940s and early 1950s, his style is experimental, as he attempts to articulate both the site or phenomenon in concrete life that would decisively orient his research, which had been stymied by the failure to reduce liberation and goodness to ontological structures. What could enable one to say the sense of goodness, if not some form of phenomenological ontology? And perhaps, given Levinas's later radicality, it is not unwarranted to attribute to him the questions: what *are* phenomenology and ontology, finally? What are the limits of sense that they can reveal? What to do, if goodness and liberation prove not to be included in the sense that they can articulate?

The present chapter is dedicated to the fundamental ontology that Levinas develops immediately after World War II, in the period stretching from 1946 to 1948, which saw the publication of the fragment, “Il y a” (1946), followed in quick succession by *From existence to the existent* (1947) and *Time and the Other* (1948).<sup>3</sup> In these works, ontological difference at last begins to be articulated in precise temporal terms: in the post-war ontology, before he enters into the late 1950s and the early 1960s, he accesses ontological difference through the dialectic of the instant. The advantage to such an approach is its capacity to sidestep the affective dimension to a *certain* degree, which gives the appearance of not prejudicing the analysis by recourse to negative affects and

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<sup>3</sup> Which arguably is a more organized and compressed presentation of his work in 1947.

feelings. It will not be long, however, before affect returns to a central position in order to give concrete *content* to existence as it appears to the existent. For time occurs inasmuch as there *is* ontological difference, and so the existent's concrete mode of being must be shown to have a temporal articulation. The ultimate result is the characterization of existence as *il y a*.

Along with giving time a more central role to play in phenomenological ontology, and developing the account of *il y a*, Levinas introduces another quasi-phenomenon that will prove to be decisive for his entire body of work after this point: alterity, and specifically, the alterity of another person. His description of it, however, is inconsistent, seeming sometimes to say that alterity is a mode of being, sometimes that it exceeds the terms of ontology. Such inconsistency represents, arguably, Levinas's difficulty in describing what he is doing and how he is proceeding methodologically when he analyzes alterity, and invites reflection on what we might take from this period of his work concerning the character and utility of ontology and phenomenology.

### **The Dialectic of the Instant: *Il y a* and the Hypostasis of the Existent**

#### **Situating the Inquiry into *Il y a***

Inquiry into *il y a* always leads back to two texts, where the idea was formulated and given central importance: *From existence to the existent* (1947) and *Time and the Other* (1948), a contemporaneous lecture series from 1946/1947. These two works clearly are meant to be read together, although Levinas will most often refer readers to the former when he wants, later in his career, to explain the concept of *il y a*. In my view, the major relevant difference between them has to do with structure: the book is simply less

clear and consequent than the lecture series.<sup>4</sup>

The lecture series has a sense of direction proceeding from the need to address the notion of ontological solitude (which is a development of ontological identification, such as we had already seen in Levinas's earlier work, but now situated in relation to the new analysis of *il y a*) and the problematic that emerges from it (TA 17-23/TO 39-44). From the first, this entails defining this problem, and locating it as distinct from—and indeed, combatting—certain Husserlian and Heideggerian theses before proceeding to develop the consequences of this solitude.

By contrast, the book's structure suggests in its disorder the context of its writing, which Levinas gives in a short foreword: “The assembly [*l'ensemble*] of these inquiries begun before the war, has been pursued and, in large part, written in captivity” (DEE 12/EE xxvii).

But it may also be the case that *From existence to the existent* betrays more than the author's war-time privation: to me, its analyses seem also to show the effort of the first attempt to formulate that which would constitute the problem or threat that being exposes us to, and to try to coordinate different phenomena with that threat in a fashion that one hesitates to call “ad hoc,” but which show, I think, that Levinas was still struggling with the precise connections between the different phenomena at issue.

Take, by way of evidence, the separation of the analyses of indolence and fatigue,

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<sup>4</sup> Howard Caygill, speaking to the organizational point, argues that the *il y a* analysis, which took up more or less wholesale a fragmentary analysis published in 1946 in *Deucalion*, is not integrated into *From existence to the existent*, but exists as an undigested fragment. On his reading, this indigestion is not accidental, but derives from the content of the piece: *il y a* is the unproductive relationship of being to negation, which sabotages Hegelian dialectic—as well as any other method that attempts to appropriate it, including Levinas's. See Caygill, *Levinas and the Political*, 52-55.



which clearly are quite proximate to Levinas's analysis of "existence without existents," i.e., *il y a*, from the *il y a* analyses. Between them lies the analysis of light, which, in its intervention between fatigue and worldless modes of being and intentionality, embodies the idea that the world is a delaying of the existent's exposure to being (DEE 68/EE 37). Or again, why is the phenomenological articulation of insomnia, which is already mentioned in the section on existence without existents (e.g., DEE 98/EE 55), placed in the next division, on hypostasis, where *il y a* is breached by the existent?

The placement of different analyses, which seem to be related, in positions that separate them from proximate (quasi-)phenomena or events, and which separate certain arguments from vital analytic support, to me suggests an author struggling to articulate a problem for the first time, whereas the lecture series, perhaps by virtue of the need to address listeners and the first working-through of the issues involved in *From existence to the existent*, has a more consequent ordering of analyses and problems.

For these reasons, in analyzing the *il y a* descriptions, I will not respect the order of Levinas's analyses in *From existence to the existent* where their (dis)order hinders clarity or seems to deprive his overall analysis of support, but will attempt to gather together the various moments of the description of *il y a*—described through imaginative reduction, horrifying affect, and insomniac state of being—into a more or less coherent whole that gives as strong a reading as possible of this multi-pronged demonstration of how existence beyond existents signifies.

#### The Dialectic of the Instant: The *Il y a* Analysis

We no sooner begin a reading of *il y a* than we are confronted with a problem:

how do we access *il y a*? This is a question of method. In phenomenological analysis, one must begin with a phenomenon, which is present to subjectivity in a correlated intentional relationship by which both are revealed in their mode of appearing, which is their mode of being. Yet what is Levinas's starting point in both *From existence to the existent* and *Time and the Other*? “Let us imagine all beings, things and persons reverting to nothingness” (DEE 93/EE 51). And in *Time and the Other*, using phrasing that is nearly identical, he likewise invites his audience to imagine that all beings were to “return” to nothingness (TA 25/TO 46).

This appeal to imagination has been a source of frustration and puzzlement for commentators: John Sallis pointedly remarks the failure to identify, even, what sort of function imagination plays or to reference any of the complicated philosophical history of imagination;<sup>5</sup> John Llewelyn and Elif Çirakman, also responding to the underdetermination of the method of imaginative reduction, take the opportunity to develop a theory of imagination that seems generally productive.<sup>6</sup>

The casualness with which Levinas treats imagination suggests an off-the-cuff procedure that was never intended to connect with the history of imagination as a productive faculty in philosophical discourse. Before an audience, it is the sort of tactic that has the benefit of being swift, immediately comprehensible, and performable on the

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<sup>5</sup> See John Sallis, “Levinas and the Elemental” in *Emmanuel Levinas: Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers*, vol. 1 (New York: Routledge, 2005), 352-359. Originally in *Research in Phenomenology* 28 (1998): 152-159.

<sup>6</sup> See John Llewelyn, *The HypoCritical Imagination; Between Kant and Levinas* (New York: Routledge, 2000); and Elif Çirakman, “Levinas's Disruptive Imagination: Time, Self, and the Other” in *Analecta Husserliana* 83, ed. A.-T. Tymieniecka (Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2004): 91-115. Çirakman's article is indebted to Llewelyn's work, but is more narrowly tailored to analyzing Levinas's work and speculating as to what Levinas might have had in mind.

spot. In a book it is perhaps less excusable to appeal to the need for a quick procedure that listeners could grasp and perform in order to enter a certain conceptual space. If seeking a justification for the *book's* use of imagination, one might perhaps see Levinas as appealing tacitly to the Husserlian procedure of imaginative variation, or else to the immediately preceding analysis of *From existence to existents*, which is a discussion of the extra-worldly or unworldly sense of artwork (DEE 83-92/EE 45-51), on the basis of which imagination may have seemed a natural transition into an analysis that wants to achieve the reduction of the world to nothingness *differently* from Heidegger.

Nevertheless, one must admit that these are mere speculations: Levinas simply does not give us enough to construct a theory of the nature of imagination that we could test, and in my opinion, the point does not merit the effort if we are concerned with understanding Levinas rather than advancing a theory of imagination. There is, after all, more than one way to “accede” to *il y a*, although the frustrated<sup>7</sup> focus of some commentators on the imaginative reduction of the world may obscure this point: the more philosophically substantive ontological reductions to *il y a* are *horror* and *insomnia*. Levinas even tells us, in *Time and the Other*: “Let us approach this situation [i.e., existence without existents or *il y a*] from another slant. Let us take insomnia. *This time it is not a matter of an imagined experience*” (TA 27/TO 48, my emphasis). In other words, if the imagination reduction troubles, for whatever reason—because “imagination” is too

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<sup>7</sup> I think here especially of Sallis who, although he does not express frustration in so many words, imbues this particular article with a sense of frustration by his particular turns of phrase. In other places, such as “Levinas, Derrida, and Others vis-à-vis” (1985), Llewelyn, too, appears to be frustrated generally with Levinas's way of proceeding through analyses and arguments. See John Llewelyn, *Beyond Metaphysics?: The Hermeneutic Circle in Contemporary Continental Philosophy* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1985), 185-206.

imbricated with difficult philosophical history to be lightly evoked, because it suggests whimsy or mere speculation without any kind of ground, phenomenological or otherwise—then we need not rely on imagination. We have a phenomenon that enables us to approach existence without existents: insomnia. Or again: “The brush with [*frôlement de*] *il y a* is horror” (DEE 98/EE 55).<sup>8</sup> Horror, as the primary affect by which one accedes to *il y a*, is likewise not an accession via imaginary reduction, but an affect whose intentum and structure is other than the intentional structure of consciousness in relation to a determinate or even an as-yet-indeterminate object.<sup>9</sup>

Accordingly, I will turn to analyses based in insomnia and horror first, rather than attempt to parse and analyze the “imaginative” reduction, although I will take the results of that reduction as relevant for and accessible by insomnia and horror.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The English translation of *frôlement* is “rustling”: Lingis apparently chose this translation to conform to the auditory description of *il y a* as *bruissement*, “murmuring, rustling.” However, *frôlement* is a *tactile* phenomenon. The *Robert Micro* defines the verb *frôler* as “to touch lightly while sliding, passing” and the noun *frôlement* as “a light and rapid contact with an object that moves along the length of the other.” “*Frôlement*” was clearly chosen by Levinas to conform to the affect of horror, as an affect with a strong tactile dimension. If indeed one considers literary and even cinematic horror, one finds that the auditory is linked strongly with the tactile: sounds are experienced *as hair-raising*, *as chilling*, *as oppressive*, *as signifying* an often unseen, unknown but malign presence that cannot be attached to any particular object.

<sup>9</sup> Affects and emotions in general are considered by Levinas to be ontological in this precise sense: “Emotion in no way puts in question existence, but rather the subjectivity of the subject in question; it prevents it from gathering itself up, from reacting, from being someone. What there is of positivity in the subject deteriorates into the nowhere. Emotion is a manner of standing while losing one’s base. It is, at bottom, the very vertigo that is insinuated in it, the fact of *being found above a void*. The world of forms opens like an abyss without bottom. The cosmos breaks up in order to let gape chaos, i.e., the abyss, the absence of place, *il y a*” (DEE 121/EE 68).

<sup>10</sup> This is not to suggest that the appeal to imagination is the only problematic aspect of the *il y a* analysis. Didier Franck argues that Levinas has unwarrantedly asserted that evil is being, when what he had established was that being was evil, two statements that are not reversible, and do not issue in the same consequences. To the degree that Levinas follows the notion that being is evil, he then argues that Levinas, given his location of bodily being as the site of resurrection, should affirm Christ as ontologically necessary, or else accept a Nietzschean transvaluation of values—a situation Levinas must have found extremely difficult to swallow given that Didier’s argument, structured so that these alternatives form a dilemma, allows one to be anything but Jewish. See Franck, “Le corps de la différence” in *Philosophia*, vol. 34 (spring), 1992, 70-96. Jeffrey Bloechl argues that the purity of *il y a* requires goodness that is equally

## Insomnia and Horror

“Insomnia,” Levinas writes, “is constituted by the consciousness that it will never finish—that is, that there is no longer any way of withdrawing from the vigilance to which one is held. Vigilance without end. From the moment one is riveted there, one loses all notion of a starting or finishing point” (TA 27/TO 48). And in *From existence to the existent*:

The impossibility of tearing the invading, inescapable [*inévitable*] and anonymous rustling [*bruissement*] of existence is manifested in particular through certain moments where sleep escapes [*se dérobe*] our appeals. One watches when there is no longer anything to watch and despite the absence of every reason to watch. The bare fact of presence oppresses: one is held to being, held to be. One is detached from every object, from every content, but there is presence (DEE 109/EE 61).

These basic descriptions of insomniac sleeplessness place emphasis on two key aspects of *il y a* existence that “invades” subjectivity in insomnia: there is, first of all, the incapacity of the insomniac to achieve through effort any end to sleeplessness. Insomnia is described as a condition of total powerlessness and paralysis, one that exceeds the sphere of the voluntary in a specific way: my will does not fall short of achieving its end (which is to come to an end of this state *of being*), like someone who strives to complete a task (a dissertation, for example) and, though progressing in it, falls short of finishing,

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pure, but the temptation of such a conception is that the two then become indistinguishable (38, 40-41). See Bloechl, “Lévinas, Daniel Webster, and us” in *Emmanuel Levinas: Critical Assessments*, vol. 4 (New York: Routledge, 2005), 31-48. Simon Critchley can also be placed within the same conceptual space when he declares, in a more Nietzschean/Blanchotian vein, that *il y a* and the infinite are so proximate as to become confused with each other. See Critchley, “*Il y a*—Holding Levinas's hand to Blanchot's fire” in *Emmanuel Levinas: Critical Assessments*, vol. 1, 75-87. Drew M. Dalton recently argued that *il y a* fails to achieve its primary end, namely to articulate an ontology of evil that would be other than Heideggerian: he argues that a careful reading of Heidegger can generate an account of evil that would not be a lack of being, but would also be other than Levinas's. See Dalton, “Otherwise than Nothing: Heidegger, Levinas, and the Phenomenology of Evil,” *Philosophy and Theology* 21, no. 1-2 (2009): 105-128.

of finding the last words that would conclude the matter, though what has come before could stand as a positive but incomplete fulfillment of the task. Rather, effort makes no headway, is itself paralyzed from the outset, as soon as *il y a* “brushes up” against me.

Levinas expresses this paralytic powerlessness by speaking of our being “riveted” to being (TA 27/TO 48), of being “held to being, held to be” (DEE 109/EE 61)—language that tries to indicate that insomnia is not dependent upon me, but happens to me. I do not seize on *il y a*, but am seized by a state of sleeplessness, or a feeling of horror. I cannot escape either insomnia or horror, because they come from that which is independent of my will: presence.

The presence at issue in insomnia and horror is not that of an undesired obstacle, i.e., of a determinate object or complex of objective conditions that I *could* foresee (and so perhaps avoid or mitigate). The move from “held to being [*tenu à l'être*]” to “held to be [*tenu à être*]” serves as a kind of corrective that elucidates the difference between the presence of a being and the presence of existence to which the insomniac is “deliver[ed]” (DEE 96/EE 54) and which horror “executes” upon the horrified one (DEE 102/EE 58): in the first phrase, one might be tempted to say that being or presence is an entity, something outside of me that approaches, that could be an obstacle; in the second phrase, however, it is clear that there is nothing outside of me that approaches.<sup>11</sup> I am held *to be*, made to persist—by what? Nothing determinable, but presence which is not the presence of any thing, nor of a totality of things, but of no thing. Presence is existence in the

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<sup>11</sup> Here, my interpretation differs from Franck's: Franck sees this paired set of phrases as conflating my horror *before* anonymous being [*horreur de l'être*] with my actual existing as an existent [*horreur d'être*] (Franck 83).

absence of any and all existents (i.e., individuals)—existing as an unqualified persistence, as failing to lapse, as the *presence* even of absence (DEE 94, 99/EE 52, 56), which latter then cannot be pure and absolute nothing, even if it also cannot be absence as a possibility of beings in their objective or real being. Presence of absence, global absence sensible<sup>12</sup> only as present or presencing and inflicted globally and irremissibly is existence not bound to existents: such presence is an excluded middle that nevertheless happens in the experience of insomnia and horror.

Insomnia, or insomniac subjectivity, to the degree that it is a mode of being structured by existence-as-presence, is not consciousness; at best, it is a *deformed* consciousness, in the specific sense that limit, determination—not sensibility, but identity and especially *personality*<sup>13</sup>—has been, or is being undone, “oppressed.” Wakefulness is not an anesthetic state of being, it is a suffering: Levinas describes insomniac wakefulness or exposure without remission to presence as “depersonalization” of the wakeful one (DEE 95, 111/53, 62), whose personality is concentrated in or evacuated down to nothing but the futile desire to end, motivated by the horror of the endlessness of insomnia and the presence it suffers. In *Time and the Other*, Levinas does not use the

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<sup>12</sup> Not thinkable, but sensible and having its sense through sensibility. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas will be very explicit on this point: prior to consciousness, sensibility is satisfied with a world that does not suffice for reason or thought *because sensibility is not reason or thought* (TeI 111/TI 138). Bodily or sensible subjectivity is always present in and a point of departure for Levinas's work, even in its early incarnations. Over time, the centrality and unsurpassability of sensible subjectivity for Levinas and (as he conceives it) for phenomenology that is not bound to be only ontological will be rendered explicit.

<sup>13</sup> This term, “personality,” does not often occur in Levinas's work. I use it here to describe that which is lost in insomnia and horror, following the suggestion of the term “depersonalization.” I do not mean to suggest that this term must be taken as having a consistent sense, either. Later in his career, when Levinas uses “personality,” he will define it as broader than consciousness, and often as the joy of living, which conditions but is not simply identical to consciousness (TeI 88/TI 115). Here, however, the deformation of consciousness corresponds to a loss of personality or depersonalization.

language of depersonalization, but describes pure existence thus: “This existing is not an *in-itself* which is already peace; it is precisely the absence of all self, a *without-self*” (TA 27/TO 49), so that with respect to this self-less existing, which is equally without objects, “[a] memory would already be a liberation [...]” (TA 27/TO 48). Self here substitutes for consciousness and personality. Insomnia describes a relationship with existence-as-presence in which, although identity—as the ontological structure of bodily being by which I suffer (I could not otherwise be horrified)—endures, my personality does not: insomnia, and the horror that attends it, is the annihilation of my person, without my life (here meaning: my existing, my persistence in being short of death's accomplishment) having come to an end.

What is important in insomnia, considered as a relation or a strange and exotic<sup>14</sup> form of intentionality, is that its “intention,” *il y a*, has a sense that exceeds its intention: it signifies self-less, worldless, objectless presence, presence that is not only distinct from the identity that I am, but which has separated from any particular being, from any totality of beings, from the totality of all beings, and which is not a possibility *of my being*. This is the crucial inadequation that, when taken together with the withdrawal of being from “exterior things” (DEE 94/EE 52) *in toto*, warrants the claim that existence as presence is not merely distinct from existents (including me), but separate, though not as a substantive. Absolute absence as positive presence of no individual is not experienceable, yet it is signified in horror and insomnia. Relying on linguistic metaphor

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<sup>14</sup> In Levinas's sense of this term: exoticism is an aesthetic mode of sensible intention that remains at the level of sensation, and fails to pass into a relationship with forms and light that is characteristic of worldly existence. See DEE 83-92/EE 45-51.



or analogy, Levinas claims that existence as separable, rather than distinct, persists as *verbal* restlessness, reiterating dissolution from and of all substances (TA 27-28/TO 47-48, 49).

Must there not, though, be an individual to experience horror and insomnia? Here, it seems to me that Levinas traces a fine line: the death of personality in insomnia and horror leaves only a dissolving identity as a structure, not of me, but of being. It is not that one experiences *il y a* directly, as actually accomplished: this would be impossible. But the presence to which one is riveted, without being able to say “I” as a separate entity, is present because of my sensibility's mode of sensing,<sup>15</sup> and signifies the independence of *il y a* from my being by assimilating my being to it, rendering my sensibility, ontologically interpreted, as a moment of the indifference of being. Depersonalized being sensibly constituted exists as anonymous participation in being as “*impersonal vigilance*” (DEE 98-99/EE 55-56),<sup>16</sup> i.e., without any sense of individuality

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<sup>15</sup> Sensibility's mode of sensing tactilely often conflates, enjoyably or otherwise, that which I sense with my sensibility which senses, this being the nature of sensibility when the cognitive mobilization of sensibility does not intervene.

<sup>16</sup> One must make a note here of the source Levinas is relying on in this instance: Lucien Lévy-Bruhl's ethnographical studies of what Levinas, unfortunately failing to contest the labeling, calls “primitive mentality” and “primitives” (DEE 99/EE 56). The handling of this ethnographical source, to which Levinas returns in 1957 in a full article, and again in 1961 in a singular reference which, despite its singularity, signals the importance of Lévy-Bruhl's thought for Levinas, must render us as uneasy as his handling of “the feminine.” Lévy-Bruhl's work argues for a significant difference between the monadological (Levinas's term—see TA 22/TO 43; see also DEE 137-139/EE 80-82, where Levinas essentially calls the subject a monad, though not in so many words) industrial (European/Western) subject and pre-industrial participatory subjectivity, placing pre-industrial, non-Western peoples not as rationally defective or backwards, but as existing in a wholly different relationship with the world that is not able to be assimilated to or explained as an inferior or illogical mode of thought, but as pre-logical, otherwise than logico-rational, “participatory,” where the difference between I and another is potentially erasable. Levinas takes participation to have ontological significance, and while he never attempts to restrict Lévy-Bruhl's descriptions of participation to “primitives,” arguing instead that participation is universal and can always recur (that is what horror effects), he does still make participation play a polemical role in his argument with then-contemporary philosophical thought. Participation is evaluated negatively, and it is hard to avoid the sense that whether he intends to or not (and articles that evince a positive xenophobia, such as “Le

or position whence individuality could be experienced or perceived. Impersonal sensibility is wholly given over to this presence, locked into a monotonous vigilance that is not attention to any particular thing but simply the sensing of undifferentiable presence (DEE 110/EE 61-62). Absence and presence seem indistinguishable, seem not simply to define each other but to *be* each other: in horror, the insomniac is exposed to the fact that “nothing approaches, that nothing comes, that nothing menaces” (DEE 96/EE 53).

Yet despite the fact that being and nothing seem almost like obverses or to be each other, horror is not, Levinas insists, affection by nothingness and most especially not by my death (or any death as a cancelation or undoing of the presence of existence) (DEE 99-100/EE 56);<sup>17</sup> it is rather an affection by or sensitivity to global presence that “brushes” against flesh at once hypersensitive and yet paralyzed, subtracted from the order of will and consciousness (hence also of knowing), incapable of acceding, from the brush of horrifying, “suffocating” presence, to power and knowledge (DEE 98/EE 55). Here, Levinas has recourse to literature for support: Zola, Huysmans, the “misunderstood art of certain realist and naturalist novelists,” and Maupassant all deploy horror not in order to be faithful to reality or even to exceed reality (DEE 97/EE 54), but in order to make reality appear “across a night, as a monotone presence that suffocates us in

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débat russo-chinois et la dialectique” (1960), where it precisely a matter of determining whether Russia's occidentality is at risk in its communist adventure with China and the “spiritual” threat of “the yellow peril” do not reassure the reader that Levinas has successfully overcome racism in every case), Levinas is relying on a generalized recoil of European society from association with non-European societies. See “Le débat russo-chinois et la dialectique” in *Les imprévus de l'histoire* (St. Clément-de-Rivière: Fata Morgana, 1994), 172.

<sup>17</sup> Again, the source here is Lévy-Bruhl. Happily, Lévy-Bruhl's work is not the only analysis that Levinas relies upon to argue that horror is horror of presence, not nothing and so also not death as nothingness or my own nullity. In addition to French realist and naturalist literature, he has recourse to Shakespeare (DEE 100-101/EE 56-57), Racine (DEE 102/EE 58), and to Heidegger (TA 24-25, 28/TO 45, 49).

insomnia” (DEE 98/EE 54-55). On Levinas's reading, authors of good fiction show<sup>18</sup>: that horror is horrified by presence. The night which so often provokes horror is not the logical contrary of light, understandable as simply the absence of its opposite, light (DEE 96-97/EE 53-54); it transforms reality or rather, exposes the horrifying presence that is *in* reality without being, as it were, of reality insofar as it is objective, coherent, worldly being:

The things of the daytime world do not, then, become in the night the source of the 'horror of shadows' *because* the look would not manage to ambush their “unforeseeable plots”; quite the contrary, they borrow their fantastic character from this horror. Obscurity does not only modify their contours for vision, but brings them back to the anonymous, indeterminate being that they ooze (DEE 96-97/EE 54, my emphasis).

Horror as an affect that accedes to the restless verbal reiteration of presence does not modify the daytime world in any derivative fashion; it rather exposes<sup>19</sup> “[t]he anonymous current of being” which “invades, submerges every subject, *person or thing*” (DEE 94/EE 52, my emphasis). This exposure does not take place before consciousness or in consciousness; horror rather “strips consciousness of its very 'subjectivity'” (DEE 98/EE 55). In later works, Levinas might have reformulated this line to read: subjectivity is stripped of consciousness, but the point is clear: “[t]o be consciousness is to be torn away from *il y a*, since the existence of a consciousness constitutes a subjectivity, since it is a subject of existence, i.e., in a certain measure, mastery of being [*être*] [...]” (DEE 98/EE

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<sup>18</sup> Whether they *know* this or not is another question: Levinas writes that their work “penetrates [...] into this materiality that, far from corresponding to the philosophical materialism of the authors, constitutes the obscure depth of existence” (DEE 97-98/EE 54-55).

<sup>19</sup> Horror is exposure: “One is exposed. The whole is opened upon us” (DEE 96/EE 54), but not a whole that is coordinate, not a whole of objects and objectivity but disarticulated, unformed matter or “materiality,” “massiveness,” “ugliness,” “nakedness” (DEE 91-92/EE 51), in an uninterrupted field of presence.

55). Here, Levinas is maintaining the Husserlian equation of subjectivity and consciousness, which later he abandons, but he maintains that equation in order to show that the existent sustains (or is sustained in) affects that exceed and undo consciousness, that exceed and undo its mastery, by which it is act and understanding.

Objects, too, as subjects (or substantives) to which being, in our daily lives, sticks as an attribute, undergo a “modification” that is not a derivative mode of objectivity: in their deformation into “fantastic” characters, characters which modern painting in its focus on unformed materiality make present or allow to manifest, objects and objectivity are annihilated. Their obscurity in their annihilated and now indifferent,<sup>20</sup> profligate, “swarming” (DEE 95-96/EE 53) and aperspectival existing (DEE 111/EE 62), is felt as the persistence of being beyond any object. Their nothingness is not a hidden possibility of their objective being (an “unforeseen plot”) which, if we could foresee it, we could avoid or thwart; their annihilation is not a vanishing into thin air, leaving no trace behind. That is the horror of their nothingness—their annihilation does not put an end to presence, it merely frees presence from its apparent subordination to individual existents, and reveals presence as *inescapable* [*inévitabile*] (DEE 94/EE 52). One is subjected instead to “this nothing of sensations” (DEE 96/EE 54), in which presence, the deathless, endless revenant (DEE 100/EE 56), returns in the absence of individual beings, as a thrill and a rustling that oppress the sensible or sensitive (but not conscious, not an existent, but rather nullified) insomniac.

Horror is not, therefore, on Levinas's account, a response of my subjective (i.e., in

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<sup>20</sup> Indifferent: that is, not kept apart by distinct, identifiable and identifying forms.

this period of his thought, *conscious*) being to some malign but hidden possibility of objects or objective beings; rather it is an affect that happens to me (“*bon gré mal gré*” [DEE 95/EE 53]!) and which, far from revealing my nothingness (death) as constitutive of worldly presence(s), “executes the condemnation to perpetual reality, the 'without exit' of existence” (DEE 102/EE 58).<sup>21</sup> Insomnia exposes the endlessness of existing, and the powerlessness of the depersonalized subject (which powerlessness is never definitively overcome by consciousness, for existential presence is never definitively overcome) before the strange temporality of the presence of being, presence as an eternity which is not an ecstasis (DEE 127-128/EE 73); while horror reveals that it is not death that undoes us, but being, and that death is powerless to undo existence which has separated from us and from all things.

#### The Dialectic of the Instant: The “Blowback” of the Existent

The intrusion and assimilation of my being to the endless presence of *il y a* is always a threat, but it is difficult to analyze this threat, for it is difficult to discover a way by which to access ontological difference. Existence is ordinarily “contracted” into a relationship with an existent in the instant (DEE 16, 31/EE 1, 12). The instant is the unique event by which there is a beginning within the eternal presence of existence, and is achieved by the appearance of an existent *who exists*. The existent or subject who exists, takes position “here” in the instant (DEE 118/EE 66). By taking position, existence then “adheres” like an attribute to the existent (DEE 16/EE 1), which dissimulates the difference between existence and an existent, for the participatory

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<sup>21</sup> “Reality”: here, this term does not of course refer to the reality of the objective world, but to the endlessness of existing, the incapacity not-to-be.

relationship between them is suspended. But the existent who masters existence has not managed to break with *il y a*tic being once and for all. The subject who takes position in the instant is the other term of ontological difference, and in relation to insomnia as depersonalized being, it is a kind of sleep (DEE 142/EE 84).

For when asleep, I am not present to the world; I am not even present to my own existence: “Sleep is a modality of the being when the being retires from itself and when it is liberated from its proper grip on itself” (DEE 142/EE 88). I am, and yet I am not present to myself, nor is existence as pure presence present to me. If attention is different from vigilance, in that the former aims at objects while the other is riveted wakefully to pure presence, the separation and differentiation of these states occurs in sleep, as a taking of position that does not transcend toward any object nor structure the existent as outside of itself in the world; it precisely closes the existent off from presence (DEE 138/EE 81). This is why Levinas, in *Time and the Other*, adopts the term “monad” to describe the subject, by way of stressing that the existent, in “limiting existence to a place, to position” as the “act” of sleeping (DEE 119/EE 66), is not involved in an intention, which is a transcendence into the world, an accession to worldly beings. One does not so much ex-sist as in-sist.<sup>22</sup> It is this peculiar mode of being, sleep as the accomplishment of position independently of an already-objectified field of indefinite space (DEE 118, 122/EE 66, 69), that constitutes the “interiority” and non-ecstatic character of the existent who exists in the dialectic of the instant (DEE 138/EE 81).

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<sup>22</sup> “To the notion of existence—where the accent is placed on the first syllable, we oppose the notion of a being whose very advent is a folding up in itself, which, in a sense contrary to the extaticism [*extatisme*] of contemporary thought, is a substance” (DEE 138/EE 81).

But this means that the existent for Levinas does not correlate first of all with worldly being, is not constituted in its being by its relationship to the world.<sup>23</sup> This does not equate, however, to its being constituted by death—for Levinas, the world, like the existent, arises as a separation from pure presence (DEE 68/EE 37). What are the implications of this point?

If “[s]leep is a modality of the being when the being retires from itself and when it is liberated from its proper grip on itself,” then the consequence, Levinas claims, is that “inversely, liberty is only ‘thought’” (DEE 142/EE 88). The point here deserves some explication, as it concerns the essential tie binding identity and *il y a*, which may otherwise seem still separate (and not without reason, that separation having been a point on which Levinas insisted). In the introduction to *From existence to the existent*, Levinas had identified the instant as the event in which existence adhered to an existent, as an attribute to a substantive, as a power to an subject. Having accomplished the decomposition and analysis of the instant through insomnia and horror,<sup>24</sup> which enabled Levinas to articulate existence as pure presence that in a sense floated free of any and all existents, Levinas is now able to give a more specific description of what the instant accomplishes as an event.

An instant is the event by which depersonalized being—*il y a*—is interrupted by a subject, who takes position in *il y a*, thereby polarizing being between existence and

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<sup>23</sup> This point Levinas expresses as the existent being “here” rather than the existent being “there,” in contrast to Heidegger. “There” signifies the worldliness of *Da-Sein*; “here” signifies the unworldly, yet already subjective, character of the existence of personality.

<sup>24</sup> Levinas describes what he discovers in this decomposition as an event that “happens in the instant itself where something, if one can say this, precedes the instant” (DEE 131/EE 75-76).

existent (DEE 16/EE 2). This polarizing interruption is not something that the subject *does*, if by this we mean that the subject is already an individual existent who arrives as if from an outside (from some unknown place or world) into anonymous being and effects a polarization, thereby interrupting it, like a stone going through a window interrupts the continuity of the window. The existent who “arises at the bottom of *il y a*”<sup>25</sup> signifies ontologically as effecting the transmutation of existence into an existent: “By the hypostasis anonymous being loses its *il y atic* character. The being [*étant*]*—that which is—is a subject of the verb to be and, thereby, it exercises a mastery over the fatality of being become its attribute. Someone exists, who assumes being, immediately his or her being*” (DEE 141/EE 83).

The subject is, then, an “I,” which is ontologically equivocal (DEE 126/EE 71). On the one hand, the I is a kind of ontological modulation, a transmutation of “the unnamable verb *to be*” into “a substantive” (DEE 141, 142/EE 83); on the other, it is its result, namely the conscious self or personality. The I is both the transmutation, or the “ontological schema” (TA 33-34/TO 53-54; DEE 130-131/75) of *il y a as* an individual existent, identified with itself, and ever after, the result of this schematism, namely, the person, the consciousness which is constituted by this schematizing “I” in the instant. The I, because it is *in the world*, is not merely the constant transmutation in the instant of worldless being into worldly existing: the subject is the *me*-self or the *myself*, the “*moi*” toward which the I as an impersonal, non-conscious insomniac or *soi* “goes”—it is, in fact, this very movement, for this movement *is* the accomplishment of identity. Identity *is*

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<sup>25</sup> DEE 141/EE 82.



that departure of the *soi* or schematic I that ends in the *moi* or conscious I, repeated in every instant, but always only accessible as the fact of beginning that lags behind itself,<sup>26</sup> of the self already having taken position in being but as sleeping that is a recoil from presence, for

beginning does not leave from the instant that preceded the beginning: its point of departure is contained in the point of arrival, like blowback [*choc en retour*]. Based in this recoil at the very heart of the present, the present is accomplished, the instant is assumed (DEE 131/EE 75).

Thus with respect to the vigilance of the I-*soi*, the I-*moi* is, as we had said earlier, a sleep or is asleep (DEE 142/EE 84); its waking is not a vigilance transfixed by presence but an attention that is directed toward objects (DEE 110/EE 61), and which is a result of the person's being asleep to its ontological function, namely to schematize, i.e., transmute *il y a* into personal existing (TA 32/TO 52). To be free of *il y a*tic insomnia is to be thought, consciousness, freedom from insomnia is this ontological sleep<sup>27</sup>—but it is not to be free of oneself; it is not to be a “dream, not at all to be a game” (DEE 135/EE 78), in which being does not weigh (DEE 34/EE 13-14). One has always to accomplish position, hypostasis, anew; yet because this “act” is not transcendence, toward a world or

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<sup>26</sup> See Levinas's analyses of indolence, DEE 25-40/EE 7-17, which is precisely the recoil of an existent before its existence or its having to begin (too late though it be to fail to begin): “Indolence is related to beginning as if existence were not acceded to immediately, but were preexisting [*prévivait*] in an inhibition. [...] Indolence is an impossibility of beginning or if one prefers, it is the accomplishment of beginning” (DEE 33-34/EE 13).

<sup>27</sup> The ambiguity and difficulty of expressing this notion is a characteristic point of instability, where no continuous discourse seems possible that could fully account, in a stepwise fashion (like a Hegelian dialectic) for the contraries place in opposition: namely, *il y a* (vigilance or 'unconsciousness'), sleep (consciousness as non-ecstatic, and so non-worldly position), worldliness (consciousness as consciousness of something). Levinas is concerned to emphasize the point that the move from *il y a* to sleep/consciousness does not occur as the negation of *il y a*, but as a retiring into self of a being, a personalization of being, liberates the self without annihilating anything (DEE 142/EE 84).

even toward another instant, it has no future whatsoever, and its past is its very being-present as being identified. And it is to be absolutely solitary, closed up in one's being, not accidentally, but because “I” am the transmutation of *il y a* into an existent: my identification, the accomplishment of subjectivity as a substantive that subordinates being to it as a power, is without past *or* future, and so ends, has always to recommence, in an endless circulation of self to self, tearing away from impersonality only for an instant, succeeding in the same evanescent measure (DEE 136/EE 79).

To be only consciousness is to be caught in this incessant transmutation-assumption of existence into my existing, without remission. In the very act of “conquering” existence as pure, horrifying presence, I participate in it:

In the hypostasis of the instance—where its mastery, its power, its virility as a subject are manifested as being in the world; where its intention is forgetting itself [*où l'intention lui est oubli de soi*] in the light and desire of things, in the abnegation of charity and of sacrifice—it is possible to distinguish the return of *il y a*. The hypostasis, in participating in *il y a*, is rediscovered as solitude, as the definitive in the enchainment of a personality to its impersonal self [*d'un moi à son soi*] (DEE 142-143/EE 84).

In transmuting anonymity into personality, the I in its schematizing ontological function remains at a “frontier” of consciousness and the vigilance of an ontologically construed “unconsciousness” (DEE 142/EE 84). The I is “amphibolous,” both personality and vigilance, each of them differently present: the schematic I persists in an evanescent present, exposed to the eternal presence of *il y a*; the personality, the I as “*moi*” in a world of temporal duration beyond the instantaneous. Yet the presence of me to myself is not undone by being in the world, although it does not always intrude upon me. Insofar as I cannot be save as identified—save as arriving at myself in the instant, in which the

schematic I intrudes in the feeling of my solitude, of suffering—of emotion, in fact—I evince signs of my being bound and enclosed within the self-reference of my being: denial of charity and sacrifice are affirmations of solitude, evince my foundation in the circulation of self to self, as unbreachable identification, as engaged in existence in order to exist separately from it.

It would appear that the world and personality cannot be accounted for from out of the instant, from the relationship of ontological difference between existent and existence, in which the identity dialectic of the self is articulated—and in fact, that is precisely Levinas's point (DEE 68/EE 36-37). The world and consciousness as personality, rather than as schematizing I, continually involved in the effort to fall asleep, to achieve a localization and retreat of free-floating presence into the existence of a being, are events that are neither deducible from the ontology of existence and existent, nor reducible to it.<sup>28</sup> Yet they are not, just because of that, invulnerable to the consequences of the self's identity having an intrinsically amphibolous character:

The world and knowing [*savoir*] are not events where the point of existence is dulled in a personality [*moi*] that would be absolutely master of being, absolutely behind it. The *I* recoils in relation to its object and in relation to its impersonal self [*soi*], but this liberation with regard to impersonal self [*soi*] appears as an infinite task. The *I* has always already a foothold in its own existence. Outside in relation to everything, it is interior in relation to itself, bound to itself. The existence that it has assumed, it is forever enchained to it. This impossibility for me [*moi*] not to be a oneself [*soi*], marks the fundamental tragedy of the I [*moi*], the fact that it is riveted to its being (DEE 143/EE 84).

The task of liberation is infinite, for that from which I would be liberated, the schematic I

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<sup>28</sup> Hence in *Time and the Other*, Levinas argues that salvation from evil (ontologically construed) is not a “spiritual” endeavor that is contrasted with worldly pursuit of material goods and pleasure; it is not a second-order good that can only become desirable in proportion as one's material well-being is satisfied. Salvation is salvation *through the world of nourishments* (TA 40-46/TO 58-64).

riveted to being, wholly engaged in the transmutation of existence into an evanescent instant, does not occur within time that, as it were, slips away from me into the past, there to settle as an irreparable fact. The fatal ontology of the '40s marks a shift from the notion that the malignity of being inheres in its *past* perfect: it is rather the relationship between eternal presence and the aorist instant that describes the fatality of being, as committing or condemning one to a constant repetition of identification, the existence of an existent being effort simply to be, lest the horror of being reign *uninterrupted*. The evanescence of the ontological instant, which, given the analysis of *Some reflections on the philosophy of Hitlerism* might have seemed to describe liberation from the perfection of existence, appears as a false exit within a general ontological economy: the evanescence of the ontological instant is conditioned by its perfect accomplishment—this remains true for Levinas—and if it has no past, it also, as instant, has no future. In the moment, one is wholly and only one's existing, perfectly accomplished despite the failure of the past to form (DEE 124, 132-137/EE 70-71, 76-80). Thus my death is absorbed into the eternal *il y a*tic presence, while my existence as a body in place, while not yet worldly, delivers me to fruitless ontological effort, but not to being as *life proper*, as worldly existing.

### **Situating the Inquiry into the Instant and Its Dialectic: Phenomenology? Ontology?**

#### **Dialectic? Other?**

Among commentators, *il y a* is a subject of fascination, but also no little confusion as to exactly what it is, and how it is possible to describe it. There are several reasons for this, having to do with assumptions about what Levinas's relationship is with other figures, but also with very specific procedures employed in these two works. In a

relatively early commentary on Levinas's work, Philip Lawton writes that

A methodological problem (which is *eo ipso* substantive) impedes Levinas' efforts to describe the *there is*.[...] Levinas' description of the *there is*, then, is *de necessitate* not radically phenomenological, - as is true, in general and for analogous reasons, of many of his descriptive efforts, and this, even though he consciously adopts the Husserlian method" (249-250).<sup>29</sup>

It swiftly becomes apparent that Lawton assumes that Levinas is doing Husserlian phenomenology, or at least that Husserlian phenomenology is the standard by which not only to *situate* Levinas's position within the phenomenological tradition, but to *evaluate* his work on *il y a*. Others argue or assume that Levinas is primarily appropriating Heideggerian phenomenological method and assumptions, and that Heidegger's work should measure, if not evaluate, Levinas's discussion of *il y a*.<sup>30</sup> Others have noted that Levinas explicitly claims to be deploying a dialectical method,<sup>31</sup> which he conceives to be other than phenomenological. Still others have argued for understanding Levinas's early work, and especially his work on *il y a*, in light of either a supposed hyperbolic method<sup>32</sup> or else a form of personifying rhetoric<sup>33</sup> or else that he is relying on some

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<sup>29</sup> Phillip Lawton, "Levinas's notion of the 'there is'" in *Emmanuel Levinas: Critical Assessments*, vol. 1, 249-259. Originally published in *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie* 37, no. 3 (1975): 477-489.

<sup>30</sup> We could include Bettina Bergo in this grouping, although her work has tended to emphasize the influence of non-Freudian psychology and the "subjectivist" bent of Husserlian phenomenology as a condition for and supplementation of Levinas's "rethink[ing] and contin[uous] rework[ing of] Heidegger's ontology" (27). See Bergo, "Levinas's 'ontology' 1935-1974 in *Emmanuel Levinas: Critical Assessments*, vol. 1, 25-48. See also Tina Chanter, *Time, Death, and the Feminine; Levinas with Heidegger* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001); Michael Fagenblat, "Il y a du quotidien," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 28, no. 5, 2002: 578-604.

<sup>31</sup> See Hugh Miller, "Phenomenology, dialectic and time in Levinas's *Time and the Other*" in *Philosophy Today* 40, no. 2, 1996: 219-234. See also Franck, "Corps de la différence," 94-95.

<sup>32</sup> Hayat, Pierre, "La subjectivité à l'épreuve de l'hyperbole. L'approche de la méthode de Levinas," *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 91, no. 3, 2007: 483-495. Along similar lines, John Llewelyn points to Levinas's formulation of his method as a method of emphasis in *The Genealogy of Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 32-33, although see also the note 34 below.

unknown “imaginative” reduction.<sup>34</sup>

All of these claims by various scholars can be supported, albeit some more easily than others. This fact alone should give us pause. Perhaps it is possible, after over a hundred years of phenomenology, to say that some form of dialectic does belong to phenomenological method; perhaps it is possible to reconcile unreduced rhetorical modes of arriving at *il y a* with phenomenological ones. My own position is that, although we can and (I think) should accept that Levinas is engaging in a form of dialectical ontology, overall, in the post-war 1940s Levinas wavers or hesitates methodologically. The remainder of this chapter is devoted to trying to flesh out and justify this claim. In so doing, I will rely primarily on the introduction to *From existence to the existent*, and Levinas's brief methodological asides in *Time and the Other* to situate his approach to the dialectic of the instant, particularly to the moment of *il y a*, and other phenomena.

The introduction to *From existence to the existent* has pretensions to offering at least an outline of a philosophical program, even if it is one that, as Levinas admits, is fairly vacuous at this time—not fleshed out, not demonstrated, but describing rather an orientation in thinking (to borrow from Kant). Nevertheless, however faintly sketched,

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<sup>33</sup> Prosopopoeia: see Sara Guyer, *Romanticism after Auschwitz*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007, especially her introduction and chapter five. There is some hesitation here, about whether Levinas works through apostrophe or prosopopoeia, since she devotes a section of her work to the argument about the proximity and difference between prosopopoeia and apostrophe whose resolution is not clear; I take it that the introduction, however, definitively tilts the overall work in the direction of affirming the importance of prosopopoeia for Romantic writing of the unsayable, and that what holds for the overall work is intended to hold for her discussion of Levinas. Simon Critchley likewise claims that Levinas relies on prosopopoeia in describing *il y a* and the other takes a prosopopoeic reading of *il y a* and death in Levinas's work, which he classifies as *meta-phenomenological*, a term he equates with “enigma” in Levinas. See Critchley, “*Il y a*—holding Levinas's hand to Blanchot's fire,” 75-76.

<sup>34</sup> See John Sallis, “Levinas and the Elemental” in *Research in Phenomenology* vol. 28, 1998, 152-159. See also John Llewelyn, *The HypoCritical imagination*, for an attempt to bring Levinas's saying into proximity with a hypocritical imagination.

Levinas does offer us (or tries to offer us) a problematic by which to situate and frame his efforts to analyze being beyond worldly existence and without any existents. I contend that this introduction shows us a thinker groping toward a reconsideration of Husserlian and Heideggerian methodology. Let us examine this problematic.

If we are to understand how Levinas performs the *il y a* analysis, then we should take it up as a consequence of the need to think *the* ontological relationship, that between a being and being, in all its consequences:

[t]he distinction between that which exists and this existence itself, between the individual, the genre, the collectivity, God—which are beings [*êtres*] designated by substantives—and the event or act of their existence imposes itself upon philosophical meditation (DEE 15/EE 1).

The move to formulate *il y a* in other words, emerges out of a preeminently philosophical experience, which must be respected. But this experience is not merely one of thinking a distinction which simply imposes itself upon the philosopher: it is an experience of a distinction that imposes itself upon thought “and effaces itself for it with the same facility” (DEE 15/EE 1). Philosophical experience, then, requires us to interrogate an experience in which an imposed distinction is no sooner grasped than it slips away, leaving us dizzy.<sup>35</sup>

Why does thought grow dizzy before this peculiar necessity of philosophical thinking? To interrogate being is to place oneself in the presence of a distinction that flickers, its terms—existence, act of existence; an existent, a substantive—wavering, seeming sometimes different, sometimes confused, but always confused in a certain

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<sup>35</sup> “For thought to bend toward the void of the verb *to exist*—of which, it seems, we can say nothing and which only becomes intelligible in its participle (the existent), in that which exists—is like a vertigo” (DEE 15/EE 1).

direction: being or existence will be difficult to distinguish from *the being or the existent*:

Thought insensibly slides from the notion of being [*l'être*] as being [*être*] from that by which an existent exists, to [...] a 'being' [*étant*] in general', [...] a 'being' [*étant*] [...] which is not the pure fact or action or event or work of being [*l'œuvre d'être*]. The latter will be understood in its confusion with a 'being' [*étant*]" (DEE 15-16/EE 1).

The difficulty of maintaining the distinction between an existent [*étant, éxistant*] and existence, being and its “work” implies the non-independent status of these two terms, which does not permit them to be easily separated (DEE 16/EE 1). Levinas claims that the incapacity to hold dependent terms in distinction from each other is a consequence of an incorrect understanding of the time of the instant: instants are atomic temporal units (DEE 16/EE 1) that are not construed as able to be the time of an event, which takes time, which is articulated, as an instant is not.

From this, we might conclude that Levinas sees that we ordinarily understand instants simply to *separate* events, which events occur in continuous streams of temporal instants. These instants, however, do not *constitute* events in themselves, or *articulate* events, they merely, as it were, space out the event in a time continuum formed by holding instants together *somehow*. If the relationship of existence and existent is always already constituted [*déjà fait*] by the time thought considers the terms of the relationship, such that thought cannot isolate these terms from each other, then Levinas seems to suggest the following: that the constitution of the relationship of existence and existent *as a relationship in which the existent “dominates” existence*—so that one can only say existence through saying *what* exists)—occurs not *between* instants, nor among a continuum of instants somehow held together, but *in the instant*.



What will be at issue, if one wishes to think the *relationship* between existence and an existent, will be to reduce the apparent unity of the existence-existent relationship (DEE 16/EE 1-2), to a pair of terms that can be interrogated apart from each other.<sup>36</sup> The instant permits this holding of existence apart from the existent that masters it. Why? What is an instant? It is “the ‘polarization’ of *being in general*,” between a being and being in general (DEE 16/EE 2).<sup>37</sup> It is a temporalization in which one might catch a glimpse of the *achieving* of the conjunction of existence and existent. In their very coming into conjunction, one has a chance to consider the conjuncts, which appear in the instant of conjunction as also different from each other.

For Levinas, then, the question must inevitably arise: what philosophical method could interrogate the instant successfully, i.e., in such a way that existence and existent remain at least distinct, that shows the articulation of an instant between these terms? Although he does not say what method *could* accomplish such a task, Levinas excludes at least one method from consideration. For he claims that for “phenomenological analysis [the instant] is indecomposable”: it cannot be further analyzed (DEE 16/EE 2).

Why is phenomenological analysis incapable of cracking the instant? And whose phenomenology? Relying on Levinas's earlier writings, we note that he claims that, with

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<sup>36</sup> It is not wholly clear in the introduction of *From existence to the existent* whether Levinas conceives of the difference between existence and existent as a distinction or a separation. In *Time and the Other*, he insists early upon the critical importance of the ontological relationship between existence and an existent as being one of separation rather than distinction (TA 24/TO 45). In the introduction to *From existence to the existent*, however, is not said in these terms, although one might possibly infer them.

<sup>37</sup> This argument for the instant clearly is meant to ground the analyses of indolence and fatigue that open *From existence to the existent* (DEE 25-52/EE 7-25). These analyses are aimed at showing that the effort that fatigues and the indolence thwarting action temporalize as instants in which, before *having to be*, one holds back. Work, emerging out of indolence, proceeding as effort, has a discontinuous temporal structure that Levinas interprets ontologically as the repetition of instants in which the self assumes its subjectivity as taking on, as having to master being.

respect to Husserlian intentionality,

the whole originality of the phenomenological conception of the relation between thought and its object appears precisely here. It is the sense in which the object is attained and, consequently, in which it is posited as an *existent* that phenomenological analysis seeks to discover. [...] It is not by the fact of reflecting on itself that the relation between the object and thought is defined, but by the sense of the object and of its existence. Henceforth it is not a matter of knowing whether the object is faithfully reflected in consciousness, but what is the sense in which it appears (OEH 27/WEH 64, emphasis mine).

Phenomenology conceives the relationship between thought and object as the sense of the object in its existence, so that it then becomes simply a matter of determining how (through what determinate mode of thought) the object appears as being in such and such a fashion. Yet if we are investigating the sense of *existence*, which is precisely not an object and not even an existent, and which is to be held at a distance from any object (and from any existent), can a phenomenological analysis in Husserlian terms successfully hold existence apart from an existent? It seems unlikely. It is also unclear whether the Heideggerian reduction and modification of intentionality, which clearly has influenced the topic of Levinas's work here, would be adequate to describing and analyzing an instant, given that Heidegger's work demonstrates that temporality is essentially ecstatic (H 327-329/300-303; DEE 19-20/EE 4): an irreducible relationship of past and future in the constitution of the present, and vice versa. Could an instant have any claim to attention, save as an objectified understanding of time in a philosophy committed to ecstatic temporality as the original possibility of objectified time?

In light of such considerations, neither Husserlian nor Heideggerian modes of phenomenological inquiry seem likely to succeed in analyzing an instant, and so in successfully holding existence apart from an existent, in reducing the polarity of the

instant. What, then, is the mode of inquiry that *can* make headway in the analysis of a punctiform temporality of the instant, which is nevertheless to be thought as having an articulated structure through which events (or an event) are accomplished? Given the role that the instant will play, namely, rendering visible the terms that constitute the “general economy of being,” it seems that ontological inquiry must be at issue.

But again, what sort? Levinas tells us that his inquiry is motivated by “certain positions of contemporary ontology that have permitted the renewal of the philosophical *problematic*” (DEE 18/EE 3). And he admits that “at the beginning, our reflections are *inspired* to a large degree—for the notion of ontology and of the relationship that man maintains with being—by the philosophy of Martin Heidegger” (DEE 19/EE 4, emphasis mine). But he does not claim to be doing what Heidegger is doing,<sup>38</sup> only to be inspired by him—problematically inspired, as it were, and indebted, certainly, for the general idea of what ontology is, a study of the relationship between individuated human being and being,<sup>39</sup> such that being is understood or intelligible. The character of this relationship, however, and the character of the being concerned with this relationship are not necessarily exactly as Heidegger conceives it (TA 24-25/TO 45).<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> It certainly seems clear that the inspiration Heidegger furnishes is not an inspiration to continue Heideggerian phenomenological ontology and its task of eliciting the sense of *Sein*.

<sup>39</sup> This is, obviously, a very loose formulation, since Heidegger is uninterested in “human being,” which is an imprecise term for him until the being of this particular being has been clarified. It is also clear that Levinas understands that for Heidegger, philosophical anthropology, in which the term ‘human being’ is appropriate, comes *after* and must be based on fundamental ontology; this does not imply he must adhere to such a stance absolutely or that to be inspired by Heidegger forecloses on describing ontology as investigating the relationship between human being and being. See note 42 below.

<sup>40</sup> Some critics have contended that Levinas’s translations of *Da-Sein* by *existent* and certainly “man” already betray his distance from Heidegger—that in fact, he has failed to understand the necessity or perhaps the character of ontological difference, and his translations are evidence of this. Most readers of Levinas will allow that to translate *Da-Sein* as *existant* or *étant* seems to err in considering that *Da-Sein* is a

In light of these points, the question that Levinas's work raises here is: what is ontology if it is not phenomenology as Heidegger practices it? Especially since Heidegger's phenomenology<sup>41</sup> is conceived as a phenomenological ontology, the rejection of phenomenological method as inadequate, which rejection is nevertheless coupled with a tacit affirmation of ontology, suggests that Levinas is groping for an ontological method that would be other than Heidegger's, without being Husserlian either. "It is impossible for me to explain this method at length here [...]," he tells his audience (TA 67/TO 78). Nor does he clarify his methodological position in *From existence to the existent*, leaving the reconstruction of his way of inquiring to commentators.

If ontology is not (wholly) phenomenology, if it is not phenomenology "to the end" just because it incorporates dialectic, then this warrants the question: is Levinas's

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*Seiendes*—which is evidently not so. See for example, see Franck. "Corps de la différence," 71. However, I would propose by counterpoint the following: in the first place, if Levinas is making a simple error, this error stands in sharp contrast to the fact that he had consistently taken existential philosophy to task for seeming to take Heidegger's project for a philosophical anthropology (see, for example, "From description to existence" [EDE 93], or again in "Is ontology fundamental?" (1951) [EN 15-16/ENE 3-4]). Guillaume Fagniez points out that in the first wave of reception of Heidegger's work in France, Levinas was "almost alone" in realizing that Heidegger's project was an ontology, devoted to elucidating the structure and sense of being, not a *Da-sein* analytic as some form of anthropology. See Fagniez, "En découvrant l'existence avec Emmanuel Lévinas," *Studia Phaenomenologica: Romanian Journal of Phenomenology* 6 (2006) : 171-187. I find it unlikely, therefore, that Levinas's decisions derive from any simple misreading; rather, I would suggest that they represent a definite philosophical decision that philosophical ontology, whether phenomenological or dialectical, whether it makes sense to divide these inquisitional modes or not, requires there to be not just *some entity*, but a human being. As Bettina Bergo has argued, Levinas's philosophy, for a variety of reasons, is always "minimally subjectivist," not in the sense of espousing subjectivism, but because a fundamental philosophy begins from the inquirer, who has always been human. See Bergo, "Levinas's 'ontology' 1935-1974" in *Emmanuel Levinas: Critical Assessments*, vol. 2, 25-48. Moreover, one might take as a cautionary note Heidegger's own admitted difficulties with human bodiliness, and wonder whether Levinas's decision to insist upon an existent, rather than *Da-Sein*, whose internal accent is essentially ambiguous (is *Da* modifying *Sein*, or is *Sein* modifying in some fashion or attributed in some fashion to the *one there?*), was not a wise decision.

<sup>41</sup> His early work, exemplified in *Being and Time*; since *Being and Time* is Levinas's most common Heideggerian touchstone, and the work that he finds phenomenologically convincing (EI 38-39/EaI 41-42), far more so than later works of Heidegger, unless otherwise indicated. When speaking of Heidegger, I will most often mean the Heidegger of *Being and Time*, to whom Levinas had consistent, even if often combative, recourse.

ontology dialectic? Levinas certainly claims that to believe in ontological problems is “a matter of affirming that *being* is not an empty notion, that it has its own dialectic; and that notions like solitude and collectivity belong to a certain moment of this dialectic and are not merely psychological notions” (TA 17-18/TO 39). Moreover, he had claimed in *From existence to the existent* that Heidegger's interpretation of human existence, as an ecstasis “possible [...] uniquely as an ecstasis *toward the end*,” an ecstasis that would define the tragic of existence as imperfection and nothingness, was dominated by the dialectic of being and nothingness (DEE 19-20/EE 4).

Yet Levinas's dialectical ontology moves in a way that either exceeds or else is other than the dialectic of being-nothingness that he finds in Heidegger's work,<sup>42</sup> and it seems necessary that it do so, for his own aim, “to put in question the idea that evil is imperfection” (DEE 20/EE 4) and to show that “[b]eing is evil not because it is finite but because it is without limits” (TA 29/TO 51), has to overthrow the results of the being-nothingness dialectic which, rightly or wrongly, he sees as determinative of Heidegger's *Angst* reduction. Adriaan Peperzak has argued that *il y a* is characterized in a way that seems comparable to the early stages of Hegelian dialectic.<sup>43</sup> This thesis is tempting,

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<sup>42</sup> A dialectic which repeats the results of Augustinian and post-Augustinian efforts to think the nature of evil and goodness.

<sup>43</sup> See Adriaan Peperzak, “*Il y a* and the Other: Levinas vis-à-vis Hegel and Kant” in *Beyond*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1997, 193-203. Peperzak in general is attentive to the ways in which Levinas's criticisms of totalitarian philosophy are more suited to deflating Hegel than Heidegger (although he also notes, in “On Levinas's criticism of Heidegger” that Heidegger *does* have an explicitly totalitarian moment in his analysis of *Dasein*. See Peperzak, “On Levinas's criticism of Heidegger” in *ibid.*, 204-217, especially 210-211. Peperzak raises the question of whether Levinas can avoid espousing dualism in attempting to say *il y a* and the infinite, although with the caveat that one should not simply assume that this question, which Hegel could ask, is well formed (197). The difference between Peperzak's interpretation of *il y a* and that of someone like Caygill, for example, who also argues that *il y a* is proximate or at least intimately concerned with Hegel's dialectic, is that Peperzak is more willing to say that *il y a* assumes a meaning based in our enjoyment of the elemental, and so can be redeemed (197);

although it seems to me that *il y a* may be more chaotic than even Hegelian nature is able to admit. But if there is proximity between the description of *il y a* and Hegelian nature, the overall movement of Levinas's work, as Peperzak acknowledges, is not dialectical in the sense that Hegel uses this term. But what is it, then? Is there a name for his method? Hugh Miller has argued convincingly that although Levinas's work in *Time and the Other* and *From existence to the existent* is dialectical, it is not Hegelian—his transitions are far too external to each other,<sup>44</sup> and deliberately so.<sup>45</sup> If Heidegger's work is dominated by a dialectic of being and nothingness, in which the subject is resolved and delivered to his or her “ownmost possibility” of being, in which the unity and totality of his or her existence is given, Levinas's dialectic is an attempt to bring into relief for the reader a series of breaks in which existence or an existent *is accomplished*, but independently of reason, will, or a unified or uniform movement logically deducible from any essence of being or even from a progression of contradiction.<sup>46</sup> His dialectical ontology is also not phenomenology, or at least is not so “to the end” (TA 67/TO 78), which again implies that for Levinas, at this time, phenomenology does not have a dialectical character.

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whereas Caygill argues that *il y a* itself is a moment of contestation with Hegel, for *il y a* is formulated so as permanently to sabotage the efficacy of contradiction that generates the productive movement of Hegelian dialectic. See Caygill, *Levinas and the Political*, 52-55, 58-61. To my mind, the difference derives from the works each author privileges in describing *il y a*: Peperzak refers entirely to *Totality and Infinity*, whereas Caygill refers to Levinas's early works. My thesis, that the fate of *il y a* is a symptom of Levinas's overall working through of ontology, being and the alterity of goodness beyond being, takes such a difference as itself significant for an overall understanding of Levinas's thought.

<sup>44</sup> Perhaps the most explicit and pointed discontinuity is the transition from *il y a* to hypostasis itself, about which Levinas famously says: “Obviously I will not be able to explain *why* this takes place. There is no physics in metaphysics. I can simply show what the significance of hypostasis is” (TA 31/TO 51).

<sup>45</sup> Hugh Miller, “Phenomenology, dialectic and time,” 219-234.

<sup>46</sup> “Presence of absence, the *il y a* is above contradiction; it embraces and dominates its contradiction. In this sense, being [*l'être*] has no exit ways” (DEE 104/EE 60).

Levinas, then, is performing a sort of ontology, one that, if it does not have a name, can be characterized according to his own testimony and the evidence of his texts, as dialectical (but not in a Hegelian way<sup>47</sup>), as *somewhat* phenomenological (but not “to the end,” apparently just because it is dialectical), and that is inspired by Heidegger insofar as the focus is on the relationship between existence and an existent, but discontinuous with Heidegger's work on several points. The central ontological relationship for Levinas is not a distinction between existence and an existent, but, as is well known, a separation, which has implications for the character of Levinas's dialectic: its phases are not the unity of the contradictory terms in a third term, nor progressive and productive in the sense of driving one to this unification by the force of logical rigor and deducibility.

Why does Levinas wish to proceed in a specifically ontological inquiry? Particularly if he wishes to leave the “climate” of Heideggerian thought, why would ontological inquiry be attractive to Levinas? There are, I think, two reasons for this commitment to an ontological method of philosophizing in the post-war 1940s. Although admittedly speculative, they are based in the results of Levinas's pre-war work and his pressing need, especially urgent after the war and the Holocaust, to philosophize otherwise than Heidegger had done. As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, the study of key pre-war Levinas writings had shown that Levinas, who, since 1929, when he criticized in a brief note Husserl's neglect of the specificity of axiological intentions, had

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<sup>47</sup> Is it possibly a Platonic dialectic? This seems unlikely, given that Levinas explicitly claims that his Platonism is relatively empty at this point, that Plato's idea of the good beyond being is a motif and directive, but no more than that (DEE 11/EE xxvii). Given that the nature of Platonic dialectic is itself not settled, it would be difficult to decide whether Levinas proceeds through a Platonic dialectic.

demonstrated an interest in *axiological* phenomena, such as racism and liberation, had discovered that an ontological inquiry into such phenomena was well able to reduce evil to ontological structures of existence, to the ontology of presence as such, rather than lack of being.<sup>48</sup>

He had never been able, however, to locate and articulate the sense of goodness through examining the ontological distinction between existence and the human existent, despite repeated efforts to do so. A failure to discover this sense however is not yet a demonstration that goodness is *not* ontologically reducible. Existence had first to be revealed in its generality: the general economy of being had to be established beyond the economy of identity, shall we say, at work in a suffering individual. This would require another ontological investigation of Levinas, one that could give reason to think that the evil of being belonged to the very structure of being, by which being, as it were, reverberates.

At the same time, Levinas was seeking the sense of goodness, and had not, I think, abandoned the idea that ontology—possibly phenomenological, but perhaps also a dialectical—could reveal this sense, articulating it as a relationship of being and a being. If this is correct, then perhaps we may read *From existence to the existent* and *Time and the Other* as Levinas attempting still to carry through an ontological reduction of goodness, though through an ontology whose method is not able to be reduced to that of Heidegger, Husserl, or Hegel.

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<sup>48</sup> See chapter 1 of the present work for an overview of Levinas's pre-war phenomenological ontologies, all of which had been drawn to reductions that revealed evil in being or as being, and always through attention to the sensible body.



Evidence for this claim may be found in the fact that Levinas's dialectic, which attends to the moments in which a transition is accomplished in a way that is neither logically deducible from prior moments nor through the will of the existent, is not deployed only to investigate the sense of existence prior to its domination or "assumption" by the existent. The dialectic also allows Levinas to begin to analyze the structures of sociality, based in the relationship of the instant to alterity. Nor were these final, often short, investigations afterthoughts. Rather: "This was my main goal," writes Levinas; "I have been bent on emphasizing that alterity is not purely and simply the existence of another freedom next to mine" (TA 87/TO 92). Therefore, "[t]he concrete situations [of femininity, identity in hypostasis, solitude, and liberation of the ego] that have been analyzed represent the accomplishment of this dialectic" (TA 87/TO 92).

Dialectical ontology is deployed, then, to make manifest the externality and difference between worldly relationships among beings, the identity of the I or bodily self, and the ontological relationship *par excellence* of existence and existent; and to again make manifest the difference between all of these relationships (worldly, unworldly and amphibolous self- and self-*il y a* relationships) *and* the relationship that holds between a self-identified monadic self and the alterity of another.

The world, which renders impersonal beings objects and my being *life*, certainly accomplishes more than the ontological instant of identification, which might seem to imply that the world and its relationships are alterity relationships. Levinas does not yet speak in terms of relative versus absolute alterity, as he will in *Totality and Infinity*. Yet one could already see the difficulty of holding that the world is other with respect to me,

insofar as the world does not foreclose on *il y a*tic return: suffering is always possible in a world of appetitive intentions; in *extreme* suffering, where anxious need, different from sincere desire *qua* appetite (DEE 59, 68/EE 30, 36), becomes “imperious” (DE 104/OE 58), the ontological instant erupts once more. The world as a salvation from both the instant and *il y a*, does not “refuse” the fatality or “the definitive” of the instant's ontology by rupturing the timelessness of the instant and *il y a*. Rather, it establishes a relationship of instants with each other, such that no particular one, nor any particular sum or totality of them—even of past instants—is definitive, for there are always other instants which I could take up (DEE 143-144/EE 85).

This new temporal configuration—which is not deducible from hypostasis, itself not deducible from *il y a*—allows me to live with respect to the perfection of the instant “as if I had never taken anything up” (DEE 144/EE 85), provided that need's dissatisfaction does not consume all my time with the need to escape it. Each instant *compensates* for the rest by providing another position to escape to—but also a new position in which one might at any moment be caught and riveted to being. This possibility constitutes the fragility and ultimate futility of worldly escape, and of consciousness, though it is also a temporality in excess of the aspectual modification of the verb 'to exist' that fundamental ontology describes. Yet *how* the world accomplishes this temporality remains mysterious. Thus, although the world cannot be reduced to the coordinates of the fundamental ontology, *il y a* and hypostasis, its status overall is ambiguous. It is neither *simply* derivative of fundamental ontology (for the world exhibits temporal continuity that exceeds the eternal return of *il y a* or the evanescence of the

ontological, hypostasis instant), *nor* is it other with respect to me (DEE 56-57/EE 28-29), for I am at home with myself in the world and so accomplish myself. Nevertheless, in relation to the world, “*I*” means and is already and mysteriously more than an ontological function accomplishing itself, so that ontology, identification, and excess seem strangely intermingled in Levinas's movement between fundamental ontology and worldliness.

Alterity, by contrast, is not the world, nor is it being. The alterity relationship *par excellence* occurs not as the world, but as differently-sexed humanity, which suggests that here, Levinas should be seeking a way to describe alterity's goodness in terms appropriate to a goodness beyond being (if we can find such). Within the general economy of being, the perfect accomplishment of being in the instant and the eternity of presence are, as we have seen already, both tenseless aspects of the non-substantive verb *to be*. The instant and eternity of being are without time, for they are *aspects* of existence; as for the time of the world, it is a time of delay against the return of *il y a* and the effort of the hypostatic instant, which is fruitless insofar as it only accomplishes me as a moment of this fundamental ontology. Only the relation with alterity, as opposed to being or non-being, is truly fecund: it is fecund *because* it opens as futurity that is not another compensatory instant. In the relationship with the differently-sexed other, i.e., *eros*, there opens a new temporal dimension that does not accomplish *only* to me and my identification. Fecundity opens as the future of the other who is my child, and so evades, thanks to the life of my child, the *ultima latet* of my death, which returns my instant to eternity. For my child is both my being and an affirmation of my personality, but is so beyond the circuit of identification in which, in the instant, I accomplish (only) myself. In this sense, the

relationship with alterity occurs and accomplishes itself *beyond being*.

In the description, however, of alterity relationships, particularly if one is sensitive to Levinas's later work and his efforts to extract language from its ontological bent even if this means “abusing” language,<sup>49</sup> one is struck by Levinas's willingness to say that fecundity signifies “a multiplicity and a transcendence *in this verb 'to exist,'* a transcendence that is lacking in even the boldest existentialist analyses” (TA 86/TO 91, my emphasis), or again that “Paternity is not a sympathy through which I can put myself in the son's place. It is *through my being* not my sympathy, that I am my son” (TA 86/TO 91, my emphasis). Moreover, the alterity content of the feminine sex—the first other for Levinas<sup>50</sup>—is described as effecting the break-up of existence into a non-uniform existing whose phrasing is eerily Heideggerian:

The coexistence of several freedoms is a multiplicity that leaves the unity of each intact, or else this multiplicity unites into a general will. Sexuality, paternity, and death introduce a duality into existence, a duality that concerns the very existing of each subject. Existing itself becomes double (TA 87-88/TO 92).

And yet, Levinas had just come from insisting that the term existent is “accomplished in the 'subjective' and in 'consciousness',” whereas “alterity is accomplished in the feminine” (TA 81/TO 88), whose movement is an inverse of the unmarkedly masculine movement: “The transcendence of the feminine consists in withdrawing elsewhere, which

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<sup>49</sup> Levinas has recourse to the phrase “even if by an abuse of language” in *Otherwise than being or beyond essence*: see n. 19.

<sup>50</sup> The first other, whose alterity should be testified to in more than fecundity—which Levinas does in fact attempt to show. Nevertheless, his success in describing the alterity of “the feminine” or of the other sex, or even of my child on some readings, is dubious: see Silvia Benso, *The Face of Things; A Different Side of Ethics* (New York: SUNY Press, 2000), 29-44; Stella Sandford, “Levinas, feminism, and the feminine” in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 139-160.

is movement opposed to the movement of consciousness” (TA 81/TO 88).<sup>51</sup> If sexuality is the break-up of existence into a non-uniform event or quasi-phenomenon, then who are the subjects thus separated and maintained in their unity (instead of being submerged into a general will)?

To the degree that masculinity is correlated with a subject, whose definition is specifically its ontological structure (identity), is Levinas saying that existence breaks up into a multitude of masculine islets, separated by feminine alterity *which does not exist as an existent or a subject?*<sup>52</sup> Is the break-up of existence a fracturing into monads without any pre-established harmony between them, each of them persisting as monads so as not to end in the monism of insomniac exposure to *il y a* or a “general will,” yet desiring—not each other—but the alterity that separates them from each other as well as from *il y a*? Or does the break-up of existence result in existence that is broken up because *existents* are differently sexed (so that “subjects” refers to masculine and feminine subjects), and these differently sexed monads, desiring each other's alterity as sexed beings, transcend their monadological enclosure likewise without ending in the monism of *il y a*tic insomnia or a general will? Is there a difference? And why is it that Levinas feels the need to articulate sexuality, paternity, and death as breaking up the unity and uniformity of being in a way that “concerns the very existing of each subject,” i.e., of

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<sup>51</sup> It is significant that Levinas says that the feminine withdraws *elsewhere*: by the time he writes *Totality and Infinity*, he will have determined that the withdrawal of the other is not *to anywhere* (TeI 3-4, 8/TI 33-34, 38). “The Other [...] is [...] like the Ideas of Plato which, according to Aristotle's formula, are not in a place” (TeI 8/TI 38). To say that the other occupies another place risks suggesting either another location within being (in which case, I could potentially occupy that location and the other), or else to set up another world behind the one occupied by the self (AE 4/OB 4), which would be ontologically and phenomenologically obscure.

<sup>52</sup> Or as a being [*étant*] (TA 81/TO 88).

each existent? Why say that existing is doubled, i.e., split into two (two masculine monads separated by a non-existent femininity, or a masculine monad and a feminine monad)?

The mixed discourse of alterity and ontology in these passages, where the transcendence of alterity is said in such a way that it often seems existence itself or being in its verbliness has an alterity function in addition to an identity function, in terms of a break-up of existence into moments that transcend each other and do not reunite into a monism or a pre-established harmony, to me suggests that Levinas is yoking alterity to a very ontological language, accessed through an ontological method, under the impetus of previous efforts to articulate the positive sense of goodness ontologically. At the same time, he has already made a crucial shift in his thinking, and begun to think that somehow, goodness might not be articulable as an ontology, as a relationship between a being and being, whether that relationship is conceived as a distinction or a separation. Nevertheless, the full implications of situating his research under the heading “the good beyond being” may not yet be clear; his own method, despite being called “dialectic,” despite being used “again and again” (TA 78/TO 78), may not be a method he himself can describe clearly, other than to note its negative relationships with phenomenology, and its somewhat vague orientation by the motif of the good beyond being.

Can an ontological analysis and discourse accede to the sense of alterity, or must it always fall short? What is the significance of this falling short? These are questions that Levinas will address most fully in *Otherwise than being*, more than twenty years later. At this point in his career, however, it seems to me that they are yet to be formulated,

although already, Levinas has uncovered a disturbing amount of evidence in his pre-war analyses that ontological discourse, although able to articulate the evil both of monadology and (now) of monism (*il y a*) in terms of relationships between existent and existence, has significant difficulty articulating the sense of goodness in terms of its central relationship. By attempting to recast his ontological dialectic in the light of the self's progressive (but not uniform, not enacted) liberation from existing as identity and from the intrusiveness of the ever-imminent presencing of existence, Levinas had found that a kind of dialectic between identity and alterity seemed better able to articulate goodness than a dialectic of being and nothingness.

Yet the ultimate status of such a dialectic is unclear—if it is not phenomenological throughout, is it ontological throughout? Is it ontological finesse (attention to existence and existent) that enables Levinas to describe relationships with feminine alterity and with a son as transcendent, or is it another mode of inquiry? If Levinas's discourse and method in *Time and the Other* and *From existence to the existent* are not uniform, then must we assign the success of different analyses, measured by their attentiveness to the axiological phenomena that ultimately are at issue (good, evil), to different modes of inquiry, which may not be adequate to the articulation of the contrary phenomenon?

It is not clear that we have answers to these questions. Presuming that they are relevant, and that Levinas's work in the late 1940s enables or even requires us to raise them, however, then perhaps we might add one more to our list: if Levinas is able to bring to light the positivity of evil as the ontology of indifference, articulated once as the presence of my existence to myself (or the relentless circuit of identification by which I

am powerless against the presencing of my being to myself in suffering, in which my incapacity to separate from my irreducibly bodily being-identified is the crucial condition of suffering, because it is the crucial condition for being to be present to me), and again in the *il y a* analysis which definitively deprives suicide of its status as a final recourse against the evil of being, do we know whether his strange dialectic, which may not be ontological to the end, would be as successful in eliciting the evil of existence? Just as Levinas's work seems to have made him suspect that he might need a different mode of inquiry, one that renders itself sensitive to the direction suggested by the good beyond being, than Heideggerian or Husserlian ontology to articulate the sense of goodness?



## CHAPTER THREE

### REDISCOVERING EXISTENCE WITH HUSSERL: AN EXCURSUS

#### Introduction

In the last chapter, I examined Levinas's non-Heideggerian, non-Husserlian, and non-Hegelian ontology of evil as expressing a methodological hesitation or uncertainty about how to proceed when researching the sense and structure of goodness, given that ontology as he had seen it practiced seemed mostly suited to revealing the structure of being's presence—of its evil. In this chapter, I want to focus on Levinas's relationship with Husserl, as it comes to light in a series of four essays—one appearing before the war, and three appearing afterward and in quick succession. As is well known, Levinas had begun his career by commenting on Husserl's work—under a marked Heideggerian influence, as many have said.<sup>1</sup> Yet after he abandoned the idea of writing a commentary on Heidegger that would help give a decisive explication of his project, as he had done with Husserl in his dissertation and articles, he continued to study Husserl, but not, I think, with the same purpose that he had had before.

Prior to 1933-1934, Levinas had seemed to think that Heidegger had provided a

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<sup>1</sup> Levinas himself tells us as much: see Levinas, "Interview with François Poirié" in *Is it righteous to be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. Jill Robbins (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2001), 37 and the opening pages of "The ruin of representation." Among commentators, see, for example, Adriaan Peperzak, "On Levinas's criticism of Heidegger," in *Beyond*, 204-217; Bettina Bergo, "Ontology, transcendence, and immanence in Emmanuel Levinas' philosophy" in *Research in Phenomenology* 35 (2005): 142. Levinas himself admits the allure that Heidegger's work and way of presenting it held for him as a young student.

decisive correction to Husserl's idealism,<sup>2</sup> by attempting to reduce Husserlian transcendental subjectivity to its lived situation and to the ontological structuration that was involved in that situation: namely, the being-in-the-world of *Da-Sein*. Afterward, having come to suspect that although Heideggerian-styled ontology<sup>3</sup> could describe identity as the way in which the malignity of the *presence* of being, rather than of its privation, manifested, and that ontology could illuminate the paradoxically endless, and so absolutely closed space of ontological tragedy or evil, Levinas, I contend, turns back to Husserl, this time seeking not only a method, but to determine what, if any, resources Husserlian phenomenology might have against the limitless, general economy of being. Are Husserl's transcendental idealism and focus on the analysis of consciousness simply the result of a failure to go beyond the task of science, i.e., a failure to conceive of the most fundamental way of being of a human being as more than scientific? Or might Husserl's interest in the transcendental and consciousness have another sense? Levinas had already begun to explore this latter possibility in 1940, before the war definitively interrupted such investigation for the next five years.

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<sup>2</sup> Levinas admits to Heidegger's influence on his own interpretation of Husserl in an interview with Philippe N  mo: EI 36/EaI 39. See also his *Th  orie de l'intuition dans la ph  nom  nologie de Husserl* (Paris: Vrin, 1963), 217-218; *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, trans. Andr   Orianne (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 154-155.

<sup>3</sup> Not Heidegger's (early) ontology per se, given that Heidegger's ontology, on Levinas's reading, remains tied to a dialectic of presence and absence that fails to manifest how presence "embraces" its contradiction in absence and undoes it, effectively signifying the unbroken reign of presence, and the secondary, derivative status of nothing or absence. But, as we saw, Levinas's appropriation of certain Heideggerian theses concerning the existence-*Dasein* relationship that Heideggerian ontology was to interrogate, and whose sense his ontology was to make manifest, claims to give an ontological analysis of evil and tragedy beyond what Heidegger's ontology can articulate. Not all scholars have accepted this claim: for example, see Drew Dalton, "Otherwise than Nothing."

At the same time, despite his movement away from Heidegger's project, Levinas is bound by what Levinas calls his own conviction, expressed in the introduction to *From existence to the existent*, that if it is necessary to make a break with Heideggerian phenomenological ontology, nonetheless, "one cannot leave that philosophical climate for a philosophy that one could qualify as pre-Heideggerian" (DEE 19/EE 4). This conviction will carry throughout Levinas's career, and shows in his continual reference to Heidegger,<sup>4</sup> which has convinced many that Heidegger is Levinas's primary philosophical interlocutor.

Yet it is not altogether clear that Heidegger is Levinas's major interlocutor—neither in terms of how Levinas progresses through his own analyses, nor in terms of Heidegger being the philosopher whose premises and methodology Levinas cites in order to justify precisely his own most radical philosophical claims and movements. Nor does he take from Heidegger the problematic of the *Seinsfrage*. We have already seen, in chapter two, that although Levinas engages Heidegger's project in *From existence to the existent*, he does not simply deploy a Heideggerian ontology or method, even though he develops a fundamental ontology articulating ontological difference; nor does he attempt to further the terms of Heidegger's own project. His concern with the problem of how the sense of goodness is constituted, leads him to find originary sense in a temporally

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<sup>4</sup> Even in *Otherwise than being or beyond essence*, where Heidegger's name is rare, in a footnote as telling for its content as for its tone, Levinas, addressing the rebuke of an imagined interlocutor (but one who, nevertheless, had been actual many times), writes that, if his work has misconstrued or badly understood Heidegger, nevertheless: "These lines and those which follow owe much to Heidegger. Deformed and badly understood? At least this deformation will not have been a way of denying the debt, nor this debt a reason to forget" (AE 49/OB 189).

articulated sensibility, whose function is other than the manifestation of being's sense in and to *Da-Sein*.

How, then, does Levinas proceed in his mature analyses? John Drabinski,<sup>5</sup> more than any other English-speaking commentator on Levinas, has recovered Levinas as a thinker working in the tradition of Husserlian phenomenology, specifically genetic phenomenology, in an attempt to give an account of the rise of sense—an account that renders the subject, prior to the signification of being, sensible as a response to alterity, which relates to me in a non-unifiable temporality (diachrony).<sup>6</sup> Drabinski's argument for Levinas's Husserlian lineage in his mature works traces Levinas's working with and through Husserlian methodological premises, with some references to earlier writings for support.

It is beyond the scope of the present work to engage Drabinski's careful, detailed reading in any significant fashion; I am indebted to his research, but cannot replicate it.

What I wish to do is to focus on four texts that Levinas produces on Husserl,<sup>7</sup> which

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<sup>5</sup> See John E. Drabinski, *Sensibility and singularity: the problem of phenomenology in Levinas* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001).

<sup>6</sup> By using the phrase “response to,” I am hedging somewhat, insofar as for Levinas, to respond to is to be responsible to, because to suffer “by the other” is to suffer “for the other” (AE 141/OB111). There is, however, no argument for the claim that ‘by the other’ means ‘for the other,’ and what that equivalency could signify is not explored by Levinas. The kernel of my sense of the meaning of this shift from suffering by the other to suffering for the other signifies as the equivalency of suffering by and suffering for the other, is given in Bautista and Peperzak, “Unspoken Unity: I, who enjoy and desire,” forthcoming in *Totality and Infinity at fifty*, eds. Diane Perpich and Scott Davidson, in the section on violation and the revelation of one's own dignity. However, the case for the equivalency between “response to” and “responsibility for” needs to be further argued, and at this moment, it is not crucial to interrogate whether it can be supported. I therefore use the less controversial phrase here, since it is not essential to this chapter to resolve the matter.

<sup>7</sup> Since all the Levinas essays in this chapter appear in the second edition of *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*, I will use the pagination of that book, but for the purposes of keeping track of

seem to me to give a decisive orientation to Levinas's attempts to approach the ontologically elusive good: “The work of Edmund Husserl” (1940) and his essays from 1959—“Reflections on phenomenological 'technique',”<sup>8</sup> “The ruin of representation,”<sup>9</sup> and “Intentionality and metaphysics”<sup>10</sup>—all try to identify what is central, unique, and philosophically productive in Husserl's phenomenology. Separated by roughly twenty years, these two sets of works represent, I will argue, two significant turning points that determine Levinas to work with the Husserlian method, to look for the points of instability in Husserl's work when it comes to the genesis of sense, and specifically to seek the genesis of the sense of goodness beyond the horizon of being.

As I hope to show, the 1940 essay marks the moment when Levinas, after surveying the breadth of Husserl's work, as it was then available, finds in Husserl not simply a method, but a motivating *sensitivity* to the need for a certain transcendence of existence that he does not find in Heidegger. This Husserlian motivation leads Levinas to consider whether he can requisition Husserl's assistance in the search for the sense of the good beyond being, once he ceases to focus as much on directly challenging specifically

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different essays, I will use different acronyms to identify them. Essays will be identified as belonging to this collection in the first citation, after which their acronyms will be used. English translations of these essays will refer to *Discovering existence with Husserl*, eds. and trans. Richard A. Cohen and Michael B. Smith (Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1998).

<sup>8</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “Réflexions sur la 'technique' phénoménologique” in *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Paris : Vrin, 1967), 111-123.

<sup>9</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “La ruine de la représentation” in *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Paris : Vrin, 1967), 125-135.

<sup>10</sup> Levinas, “Intentionnalité et métaphysique” in *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Paris : Vrin, 1967), 137-144.

Heideggerian analyses (of being in the world, of death, of being and time).

The 1959 essays represent the working out of Levinas's own retrieval of Husserl in the wake of his earlier attempt systematically to identify the nature of Husserl's phenomenology. At this point, I will argue, Levinas, his criticism of Husserl's work notwithstanding, has determined that he will be rediscovering existence with Husserl—or else discovering it, perhaps, for the first time, given that hitherto, Levinas had understood concrete existence to be the site of Heideggerian phenomenological ontology, rather than Husserlian transcendental phenomenology.<sup>11</sup> Unsurprisingly, then, as we shall see, it is the sense of the transcendental and its resources for maintaining subjectivity as both concrete existence *and* (somehow) free in relation to existence that will preoccupy Levinas's readings of Husserl in this period between 1935 and 1961.

### **Levinas Reads Husserl**

#### On “The Work of Edmund Husserl”<sup>12</sup>

Levinas had begun his career in 1929 by introducing Husserlian phenomenology to a French intellectual audience. His work had always included a certain critical component, mainly concerning whether the specificity of the sense of certain phenomena—especially axiological phenomena—could be given through a reduction to

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<sup>11</sup> Hence Richard Cohen's decision to abridge Levinas's work, *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger* in translation, and to limit it to *Discovering existence with Husserl*, is not wholly inapt, although the failure to translate the works on Heidegger do hamper scholarship somewhat.

<sup>12</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “L'Œuvre d'Edmond Husserl” in *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Paris : Vrin, 1967), 7-52. Originally published in the *Revue philosophique de la France et de l'Étranger* 129, no.1-2, janvier-février (1940): 33-85. Henceforth “OEH” (French) and “WEH” (English).

consciousness. Heidegger had seemed to him for a time to offer the possibility of correcting the abstraction of transcendental phenomenology, by situating Husserlian consciousness *in* existence, *as* existing—as *Dasein*, rather than as consciousness or a subject before, as the modern tradition (including Husserl) had conceived of the I.<sup>13</sup> In post-war interviews, Levinas, looking back on his youthful relationship with Husserl during the man's lifetime, admitted with some embarrassment that Husserl to him, at that time, compared less favorably with Heidegger because Husserl's work seemed already less surprising, less novel than Heidegger's, which had the air of revolution about it.<sup>14</sup> Why, then, return in 1940 to Husserl's work in a lengthy explication of Husserl's work, whose scope extends from Husserl's early work in the *Logical Investigations* to the *Crisis* of his final years?

By 1940, Levinas's pre-war ontological investigations of being had led him to formulate the need for escape, and also to realize the difficulty of articulating this need, and of finding its significance within the play of being and beings, within ontological difference. The break with Heidegger, politically, had already occurred, but philosophically, it had only begun. Levinas was entering, arguably, his period of seeking a way to philosophize that respects the link between sentiment and signification, without submitting to the malignity of being, whose sense Levinas was still trying to articulate

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<sup>13</sup> See Emmanuel Levinas, "Martin Heidegger et l'ontologie" in EDE, 53.

<sup>14</sup> See Levinas, *Is it righteous to be?*, 32-33. See also his introduction to "La ruine de la representation," RR125-126/RoR 111-112, where he speaks in personal terms of Husserl as a teacher and thinker, and compares his delivery of the "permanent revolution" that was phenomenology in its recommencement—a delivery "that one would have preferred be more dramatic and even less monotone"—to Heidegger's work and personality, "immediately brilliant" (RR 126/RoR 111).

fully. It is in this context that Levinas writes “The work of Edmund Husserl” (1940).

Rather than being merely a more extensive analysis of Husserl's work, in which those works that he had not been able to include in his 1929 article due their unavailability, it is a reappraisal: an attempt to determine the nature of the philosophical enterprise in which Husserl is engaged, in light of Levinas's own concerns.

What he discovers in the course of analysis is that Husserl's phenomenology of consciousness can be characterized as a philosophy of freedom: Levinas argues this by claiming that the phenomenological reduction, on which phenomenological results depend, has not one, but two motivations. On the one hand, Levinas writes, the reduction is motivated by the recognition that our knowledge of the world as *existing world* is relative, i.e., never complete (OEH 37/WEH 73), and so an inappropriate basis for scientific knowledge;<sup>15</sup> therefore, Husserl puts out of play any thesis that founds

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<sup>15</sup> Especially for scientific knowledge: Levinas highlights at several points the way in which Husserl's philosophy unfolds itself in conformity with the pursuit of a universal science (OEH 33/WEH 69, 37/73, 43-44/79; see also WEH 9, 15), whose significance only becomes evident through phenomenology: science would arise out of the aspiration of the human spirit to freedom (OEH 45/WEH 80). See also Michael Bowler, *Heidegger and Aristotle; Philosophy as Praxis* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008), on the problem of knowledge in late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century German philosophy, including Husserl. I am indebted to Bowler's work for its interpretation of the general philosophical problematic motivating two of Levinas's major and formative interlocutors. The problem of knowledge—the need to secure the scientific status of philosophy, leading to the need to secure the possibility of knowing in the face of empirical fluctuation of theories and truths; the need to avoid relativism and irrationalism; and the need, above all, to articulate the relationship of philosophical inquiry (largely epistemological) to life in its fullness—animated debate (Bowler 1-4). From what position does philosophy as a science that produces knowledge *approach* lived reality? Levinas's answer to this question appears in “Interiority and Economy,” which may be quietly and indirectly motivated by the way in which the attempt to respond to this question had played out in the work of his formative guides in phenomenology, Husserl and Heidegger. See chapter four of the present work below, the subsection titled “Enjoyment is life,” pp. 168-179. For Bowler's analysis of the responses of Husserl and Heidegger, see especially chapter two, on Husserl's attempt to organize his work to address a set of issues of common concern of German philosophers. For a summary of Bowler's analysis of how Heidegger addressed these issues, see pp. 4-7; for a lengthier and argued analysis, see chapters four and five, which are dedicated to the interpretation of Heidegger's work in light of his philosophical context.



knowledge on the existence of that world. This motivation we might call gnoseological: it remains concerned for the originally scientific apprehension of beings in their intelligibility or way of showing as having an intelligible sense. But—and one senses that Levinas's true interest lies here—it is also motivated by the pursuit of “the *freedom* of evidence, where the resistant and foreign object appears as erupting from the spirit because it is understood by it” (OEH 38/WEH 74, my emphasis).<sup>16</sup> On Levinas's reading, phenomenology, at its most definitive moment, is motivated by the desire of the human spirit for freedom from the strange and the resistant; and Husserl's work, which, on Levinas's reading seeks to neutralize precisely the strange and resistant aspects of beings, is therefore to be understood as fundamentally a philosophy of liberty, a philosophy of freedom.

Precisely how does Levinas arrive at this startling evaluation of Husserl's work? Levinas argues that Husserl's philosophy of inner time consciousness reveals consciousness as that which is the act of giving sense [*Sinngebung*] to beings through the constitution of identities (OEH 34/WEH 70-71). Genetic phenomenology, Levinas writes, tries to grasp the becoming of consciousness, and in this sense is seeking the history of consciousness, but it remains hampered, in his view, by Husserl's aversion to the very notion of the historical constitution of consciousness. Speaking of the themes of Husserl's article, “Philosophy as a Rigorous Science,” Levinas argues that

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<sup>16</sup> This point will reappear again and again in Levinas's work: see, e.g., “Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite” in *To the Other*, trans. Adriaan T. Peperzak (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2005), 74-75; English translation in *ibid.* 90-93; see also Tel 54-62/TI 82-90.

[t]he conception of a phenomenological philosophy that will be constituted as science itself [...] and which is opposed to the *Weltanschauung*, vision of the world, of which man has need for his immediate action but which does not replace science—reflects, on the one hand, this need of science so profoundly anchored in the soul of Husserl; but on the other part *and above all, despite all that there may be of exaggeration in certain formulas and which the later evolution of his thought will soften in some measure*, it testifies to his mistrust with respect to history as the condition of philosophy. [...] History itself is constituted by a thought, it does not command in any way the very fact of intentionality and intellection. Genetic phenomenology [...] will not surmount this antihistoricism of Husserl (OEH 34/WEH 70-71, my emphasis).

On Levinas's reading, even genetic phenomenology, which was explicitly intended to access the historical constitution of subjectivity, the process of becoming consciousness, ended by saying that this process is always a process of giving sense (of *Sinngebung*) and identification. Levinas reads this strict correlation of *becoming* consciousness and *Sinngebung* as asserting the coincidence of consciousness and *Sinngebung*.

Consciousness *is as giving of sense*, and in giving sense, it constitutes the identities of its objects, thus establishing the link between identity and sense-giving. Thus following from this coincidence, Levinas argues, consciousness in its foundational intention—and despite Husserl's intentions—drops out of all history: “And thereby, the last foundation of spirit [*esprit*] appears in Husserl as foreign to history. It is the intimacy of a sense to thought and not an event overflowing thought or supposed by it” (OEH 34/WEH 71).

This foreignness to history, which term we can render as a proxy for “existence,” will, as Levinas strives to demonstrate, not be remedied by later writings. Why not?

What is the significance of the positive aversion to the historical constitution of consciousness? Is it accidental to Husserlian phenomenology? The questions are related:

rather than read this failure of genetic phenomenology to correct the ahistorical position of thought, or to read this ahistoricism as a simple aberration from phenomenology's mission to investigate the concrete, Levinas reads the absence of the fundamental moment of the consciousness-sense relationship from historical existence as *constituting the basic freedom of consciousness as a spontaneity of sense-giving*. And this ahistorical constitution of consciousness is at the same time the fulfillment of the vocation of the human spirit (OEH 38/WEH 74): if human beings have a vocation to freedom, as Levinas reads Husserl, this is the same as saying they have a vocation to sense-giving. The unity and so the intelligibility of the phenomenon must be laid bare through the revelation of its way of appearing, the horizons within which it gives itself to thought. But since sense is not guaranteed by the *existence* of the world, the sensible being of an entity must be grounded elsewhere—in the *Sinngebung* of a consciousness that is not constituted by the existing world<sup>17</sup> and that does not understand beings on the basis of their existence.

Consequently, the real existence of beings in Husserl's work is subordinated to the intelligibility of their evidence, which latter, as intelligible, coincides with the *Sinngebung*/consciousness, rather than being an overflowing of consciousness by an event that situates consciousness (OEH 35/WEH 71). Levinas refers the reader to Husserl's *Ideas*, in which “[e]ssence [...] is the ideal condition of the existence of the individual object” (OEH 35/WEH 71). Existence is to be understood *somehow* on the

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<sup>17</sup> “[...] *Philosophy as Rigorous Science* announces the theory of the *phenomenological reduction*. The consciousness whose analysis phenomenology furnishes is in no way engaged in reality, nor compromised by things or by history. It is not the psychological consciousness of man, but unreal, pure, transcendental consciousness” (OEH 35/WEH 71).

basis of a consciousness that may not, at price of compromising its most fundamental vocation, be determined by the reality of human existence, on Levinas's reading. Husserlian eidetic science and ontology were one way of attempting to accomplish this understanding, whose essential movement was “to grasp the sense of objects, while replacing them in intentions where they are constituted, and in thus grasping them at their origin in the spirit, in evidence. Spiritual life is the fact of giving a sense” (OEH 35/WEH 71).

From this horizon of the sense of spiritual life, a split opens in Husserlian philosophy between being-as-intelligibly-constituted and being-as-existing, and it is existing that has the worse of it: Levinas interprets Husserl's well-known struggle against the “natural attitude,” in which the existence of beings is the starting point, as a combat in which naturalism as a philosophical orientation is defanged by radically subordinating existence to evidence, and the real to the ideal. Husserl puts existence out of play when he targets the unreflective naivety of the natural attitude (OEH 35-36/WEH 72). For naivety is precisely what characterizes a being who is constituted *by* the world, by history, etc., and who responds sincerely—to use the language that Levinas will develop in *From existence to the existent*<sup>18</sup>—to that which presents itself.

By showing a choice of strategies in this Husserlian polemic, Levinas's analysis shows a decision in Husserl's work, one whose direction is not obviously necessary. Husserl's decision in favor of intelligible evidence over the existence of beings prompts

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<sup>18</sup> See DEE 56/EE 57 on worldly intentionality as sincere.

the question: why neutralize the *relevance* of existence for the constitution of sense? Why isolate existence as an event *overflowing* consciousness from the *Sinngebung* and its constitution of sense? As we saw, Levinas argues that this neutralization is animated and explicable by fundamental concerns: for Husserl, the “vocation” of the spirit is to be free from immersion within a world that admits of nonsense, of the irrational (OEH 39/WEH 75)—fundamentally, of events that, because they are closed to rational sense,<sup>19</sup> cannot be open to a free and spontaneously sense-giving consciousness (OEH 38/WEH 74).

From this point, it emerges that “[t]he reduction is here an interior revolution rather than an investigation of certitudes, a manner for the spirit to exist in conformity with its vocation and, in sum, with being free in relation to the world. [...] Its liberty is defined precisely by the situation of evidence *which is positive, which is more and better than simple non-engagement*” (OEH 38/WEH 74, my emphasis).<sup>20</sup> In other words, Husserl's tacit affirmation of spirit's vocation to freedom renders the subject's non-engagement in being a positive, not merely a negative, liberty.<sup>21</sup> Later, Levinas will

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<sup>19</sup> “Reason for Husserl does not signify a way of placing oneself immediately above the given, but equals experience, in its privileged instant of “live” [*leibhaft*] presence, “in flesh and in bones,” if one can say, of its object” (RTP 114/RPT 94). This implies that the irrational and non-sensical does not fall into the realm of experience, insofar as experience is given in the unified revelation of the intention in which consciousness and the noematic thing appear together as they are. *Il y a* violates that structure radically, and Levinas's focus on the absurd as the failure of consciousness or reason to achieve its task (its failure to appear *as reason*), the failure of subjectivity and the absurd to appear in a coherent relationship, are described so in order to emphasize the failure of intentionality as a unifying structure of being, the failure of the *Sinngebung*.

<sup>20</sup> That Husserl's ahistorical consciousness, whose reconstitution of the world *is* spiritual life in the very exercise of consciousness's free existence, is “more and better than simple non-engagement” in the world of action, is what exempts Husserl later from the charge that he understands being as neutral and colorless (EN 63-66/ENe 48-50).

<sup>21</sup> Negative liberty, the liberty of mere non-engagement, would be, implicitly, a shortcoming, a lack or

develop a more positive account of Husserl's transcendentalist tendencies, but one sees the seed of such a reading already.

Nevertheless, there remain significant negative consequence that attend Husserl's situation of subjectivity. Consequent to Husserl's interpretation of consciousness's situation, Levinas argues, an important problem falls out of consideration: “[h]ow this individuality of consciousness in general, freed up [*débarassée*] however from every 'facticity,' from birth and from death, is possible—that is a problem that Husserl does not pose” (OEH 39/WEH 75). On Levinas's reading, Husserl does not pose this problem because he cannot pose it, for to do so would perforce revive the possibility of events that remain fundamentally closed—resistant and foreign—to consciousness, and to the spontaneous *Sinngebung* with which consciousness coincides in its very becoming-consciousness. Such events would threaten the freedom that both defines the foundation of Husserlian consciousness and embodies the “vocation of man.” Thus not only are birth and death as factual events of consciousness unable, on Levinas's account, to be posed as relevant problems by Husserl,<sup>22</sup> but all the beings intended by consciousness, precisely insofar as they are *existents* that remain foreign to consciousness and not only the complex of intelligible evidences by which they are given, are eliminated or rather, that they exist is set to one side and neglected, along with any questions that may come of

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failure of transcendental consciousness. Levinas seems here to follow the phenomenological tendency to refuse to locate the sense of negativity in limitation, in the play of perfection and imperfection.

<sup>22</sup> And if birth and death cannot even be posed as events definitive of the life of consciousness, then can consciousness truly be the proper philosophical position from which to investigate concrete life, or the stance of concrete life itself?

their existing. The existential dimension of beings, by which their transcendence and a certain troubling unresponsiveness to consciousness is asserted, must be neutralized lest the non-sensical and irrational aspect of being break forth.

In Levinas's view, the neutralization of the troubling existential aspect of beings is accomplished, as we saw, in the move to access existents only through “the evidences that constituted [them]” (OEH 38/WEH 75), for only in relation to evidence, as inseparable from the rational life of consciousness, does spirit remain absolutely free, un beholden in any way to a resistance that we might characterize as nonsensical or as irrational. The reason that science, which seeks the truth of beings, is *the* expression for Husserl of the human vocation for freedom now becomes evident: speaking of consciousness as revealed in the *Cartesian Meditations*, Levinas writes: “Truth, manner of existing, consists in situating [...] reality in the configuration of the sense that it has for the subject, which can account for it entirely” (OEH 47/WEH 82). And he claims: “In this sense Husserl poses the subject as a monad. [...] To say that the subject is a monad is, in sum, to deny the existence of the irrational” (OEH 47/WEH 82). For Husserl, argues Levinas, if spirit is to be free, if humanity is to accomplish a vocation to freedom, in other words, its life must be the life of consciousness. But once founded in its freedom, how such a free spirit is possible as an individual spirit—what the horizon of subjectivity as *Sinngebung* *is*—on Levinas's reading, this cannot be formulated as a question within Husserl's phenomenology.

Like Levinas's other work in the 40s, his reading of Husserl targets the move to

exclude from view beings and events *in their existing*, on which attends the ever-present possibility that beings and events may not be rationalizable. That is, they may not conform to the life of consciousness as *Sinngebung*, which perhaps we might say, given that, is not only the revelation of sense, but the *demand* of consciousness *for* sense, and specifically, for sense that accomplishes our self-revelation *as free*. Yet it is important to realize that Levinas, despite his critique of the freedom of consciousness as failing to sustain a relationship with that aspect of beings which transcends the *Sinngebung* of consciousness, does not criticize Husserl's basic sensitivity to the human need or desire for "the intimacy of a sense to thought" (OEH 34/WEH 71), nor does he, I would argue, criticize Husserl's positing of a human vocation to freedom, i.e., to spontaneous sense-giving. Husserl's philosophy can rightly be called "problematic" for Levinas not only because it is inadequate to describing relations with *existents* and with *existence*, but because Husserlian phenomenology implicitly recognizes a basic "problem" that occurs at the level of existence (nonsense, irrationality, even, one suspects, anti-rationality), *yet refuses to accept subordination of the "life of the spirit" to the nonsensical and irrational*. Husserl's work, as Levinas seems to read it, is situated within a necessary sensitivity to the tension between the dimension of sense (which Husserl ties to the movement of subjectivity as consciousness) and that dimension whence sense is fundamentally challenged (which Levinas suggests Husserl recognized as stemming from the *existence* of beings). Moreover, the vocation to freedom that Levinas finds motivating the entirety of Husserlian phenomenology not only testifies to this tension, it exhibits



Husserl's response to it: namely, a conviction that subjectivity is not simply subjected to the dimension whence nonsense and irrationality arises.

Thus if we take Levinas as accepting Husserl's fundamental conviction that human subjectivity is not characterized as pure submission to existence, then we see that he reads the transcendental prioritization of evidence—revealed by consciousness to consciousness, which enables ahistorical consciousness *entirely* to account for a being's appearance—as an attempt to articulate human life as transcending its existential constitution.

The importance for Levinas of Husserl's refusal to consider the life of the spirit as based on existence and unfree in relation to it cannot, I think, be overstated. That refusal marks, in Levinas's estimation, the essential difference between Husserl and Heidegger:

Here appears the whole difference that separates Husserl from Heidegger. For Heidegger [...] [t]he manner in which I am engaged in existence has an original sense, irreducible to what a noema has for a noesis. The concept of consciousness cannot account for it. [...] The subject is neither free nor absolute, it does not any longer respond entirely from itself. It is dominated and overwhelmed [*débordé*] by history, by its origin, against which it can do nothing [*sur laquelle il ne peut rien*], since it is thrown into the world and this dereliction marks all of its projects and all its powers (OEH 48-49/WEH 84).

The significance of this passage is ambiguous, and particularly if one does not take into account the overall context of Levinas's retreat from Heideggerian ontology, as described in the previous chapter, the point may appear minor. One might read it in the context of the essay as an affirmation of Heidegger's Husserlian lineage (which affirmation occurs quite explicitly in the last paragraphs of Levinas's essay [OEH 52/WEH 87]), and thereby either as maintaining that Heidegger, too, remains indebted to the desirability of a life of

sense, or else as suggesting that Husserl's work must be read in light of a Heideggerian correction. For example, Adriaan Peperzak, tracing Levinas's relationship with Husserl and Heidegger, writes of “The work of Edmund Husserl”:

Even in 'L'œuvre d'Edmond Husserl,' written in 1940, Levinas's critique of Husserl is wholly Heideggerian, although he had, in the meantime, published some anti-Heideggerian studies. In his articles on Heidegger, beginning with 'Martin Heidegger et l'ontologie' (1932), he also claims that Husserl's objectifying philosophy is not radical enough because it does not pay enough attention to its being preceded and inspired by the way of being typical of philosophical existence (Peperzak 44).

I disagree with this reading because it assumes that the difference that Levinas claims exists between Husserl and Heidegger should be interpreted from the perspective of Heidegger's exceeding of Husserl's work, thereby rendering Levinas a Heideggerian partisan. As for the alternative possibility—that Levinas is merely affirming that Heidegger is a Husserlian phenomenologist, which might seem to commit him to saying that both Husserl and Heidegger must be transformed or exceeded (which he certainly concludes *though not here*)—to read the essay in this light, I think, demands that one ask: is this essay merely a completion or supplement of Levinas's earlier commentaries on Husserl's work? Or is the overall interpretation of Husserlian phenomenology as motivated by the vocation of sense, by which the aspiration to freedom is expressed, a moment in Levinas's reading that signals a shift in his own position vis-à-vis Husserl and Heidegger?

My contention is that if one looks at the trajectory of Levinas's work from 1930-1940, and then ahead to the period of experimentation immediately post-war, “The work

of Edmund Husserl” appears not as a Heideggerian critique of Husserl, but as a *reappraisal* of Husserl's work. The essay is therefore not a simple reiteration and expansion of commentary on Husserl; it was written to determine what exactly Husserl is doing that *is* different from Heidegger's work (even if Heidegger does stand directly in the line of Husserlian thought in some ways), and whether it might assist Levinas in finding a way out of the situation in which he finds himself, namely, seeking a way to say the sense of the good, which, in 1940, had so far proved recalcitrant, and perhaps not accidentally, to ontological inquiry.

The difference between Husserl and Heidegger that Levinas at this time finally articulates—and which is, I think, no minor point for Levinas during this period of philosophical hesitation before ontological impotence to articulate the sense of goodness—does not require Levinas to criticize Husserl. Nor is this difference (yet) based on the notion that Husserl articulates an original sense to my engagement in existence that is at odds with what Husserl's own description of subjectivity as consciousness can account for.<sup>23</sup> It is not a negative evaluation of Husserl's subjectivity as failing to achieve the position of *Dasein*. Rather, the critique goes in the opposite direction: the essay evaluates *Heidegger's* characterization of sense beyond what Husserlian consciousness can constitute *negatively*. *Dasein*, which is other than subjectivity as consciousness (and even other than subjectivity), is unfree, is “dominated” by history, “against which it can do nothing” (OEH 49/WEH 84).

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<sup>23</sup> Although the tensions within Husserl's own thinking, so that one can read Husserl against himself, will be important in a *positive* fashion in later Levinas essays. See pp. 123-127 below.

In judging that Heidegger fails to preserve the freedom of *Dasein* from being, because he submits it to the overwhelming event of existence (granted this existence is not purely nonsensical), Levinas tacitly finds fault and reason for deep concern. For on his reading, Heidegger's *Dasein* analysis subjects the human individual to existence without remission, as to a kind of fate. A philosophical orientation such as Heidegger's, exhibiting what might be called a hasty optimism with regard to the sense of existence,<sup>24</sup> could, on Levinas's reading, only distort or eliminate from view the significance of the human vocation to freedom: namely, that it is not inauthentic escapism, but the pursuit of transcendence in relation to existence,<sup>25</sup> which, on his eventual account, is equivalent neither to intelligibility nor to an isolated or universal and ahistorical human freedom. That subjectivity has such a vocation suggests that the constitution of subjectivity may be other than what either Husserl or Heidegger had realized; yet Husserl's sensitivity to the "dark side" of existence—a darkness not reducible to the opacity of existents to cognitive-theoretical sense, given Levinas's own research—provokes him to develop his phenomenology with a tacit eye to the freedom of the subject. Such freedom is, one suspects, an inapt or abstract articulation of transcendence: if the subject is a constituted (as well as constituting) subject, still, the subject *is not constituted by existence*, but y that which transcends existence.

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<sup>24</sup> Hasty, because being is always already *understood* by *Dasein*; Levinas's analyses, as we have seen, have unsettled faith in the intelligibility of being.

<sup>25</sup> For by presuming that there is no need to escape being, and relegating that aspiration to the realm of inauthenticity, Heidegger would have been desensitized to the need to take account in any other fashion of the disturbance experienced by *Dasein* in the 'face' of being.

The result of this reconsideration of Husserl's work is a reappraisal of Levinas's phenomenological allegiances: that Husserl has built into his phenomenology the need for the transcendence of subjectivity vis-à-vis being, such that subjectivity is not simply delivered to being as to fate, orients Levinas decisively toward Husserl and away from Heidegger, although not uncritically so. He recognizes—as his further work on Husserl shows—that Husserl's work is ambiguous, that it cannot simply be appropriated, and that somehow, the involvement of subjectivity in existence *must* be addressed in a way that avoids an ahistorical liberation *cum* transcendence of the subject. He must pass between the Scylla of a conflicted Husserlian idealism and the Charybdis of existence as a form of irremissible subjection to “the fatality of being.”<sup>26</sup> Yet Husserl seems more likely to be able to help him in this task than Heidegger, who radicalizes Husserlian phenomenology so as to situate subjectivity, as *Da-Sein*, in historical existence, but who also eliminates, on Levinas's reading, the vocation to freedom *from* existence as the moment of allegiance to goodness.

Such a reappraisal of Husserl also implies the need to reevaluate phenomenology. As an ontological mode of inquiry, it seems unlikely to assist Levinas. But if phenomenology were *more* than ontological in its way of returning to things themselves, if its way of proceeding in relation to beings did not simply discover ontological horizons, and if those horizons could be shown somehow to be irreducible to ontological

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<sup>26</sup> DEE 101/EE 57, 171/104.

relationships, then Levinas would have found his way in phenomenology.<sup>27</sup>

With this in mind, I want to turn to a brief consideration of Levinas's reading of Husserl as we find it in the highly productive year of 1959, shortly before the publication of *Totality and Infinity*. The aim will be to see what in Husserl's work Levinas appropriates for his own efforts to discover how axiological sense is constituted beyond being.

### **Retrieving Husserl: Method and the Constitution of Sense**

Levinas published three essays on Husserl's work in 1959, which reveal more than simply sympathy, based on thematic content, between his project and Husserl's work:

“Reflections on phenomenological 'technique',” “The ruin of representation,” and “Intentionality and metaphysics.” Levinas, in guise of commentary, appears to be seeking the *productive* elements in Husserl's work—those aspects that allow Husserl to begin and to advance an analysis—and to determine how these productive elements help generate what Levinas considers phenomenology's unique contributions to philosophy.

Although Levinas himself is not known as a systematic thinker, nor as one overly concerned with delineating his method,<sup>28</sup> this does not mean that he lacks one or that he

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<sup>27</sup> To be clear: I do not want to claim that phenomenology is simply *not* ontological, but that it contains within its approach to concrete life a moment that transcends relationships of beings with being and its impersonal horizons.

<sup>28</sup> Both John Llewelyn and Adriaan Peperzak remind us of Levinas's claim that it was unlikely that one could fully articulate one's method, and that those who concerned themselves with parsing method might have written many more interesting books. See Peperzak, “Levinas's Method” in *Emmanuel Levinas: Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers*, eds. Claire E. Katz and Lara Trout, vol. 1 (New York: Routledge, 2005), 337-351. Originally in *Research in Phenomenology* 28 (1998): 110-125. See Llewelyn, *The genealogy of ethics*, 31-33. Levinas only rarely speaks of method, and when he does, either his claims are very general, or else, as we saw in the previous chapter, somewhat obscure and they suggest that his

does not appreciate Husserl's methodology.<sup>29</sup> The question is what he takes that method to be, and how it unifies a diverse company of phenomenological practitioners (himself included).<sup>30</sup>

To understand in what Husserlian method consists it does not suffice, on Levinas's reading, to restrict oneself to what Husserl explicitly understands by his method, for “[o]n this point, his work does not seem to have been moved by the methodological considerations that fill it. Moreover, the majority of the time, these considerations already express positions, responses to problems, rather than rules on the art of treating these problems” (RTP 111-112/RPT 91). Rather, one must look to Husserl's actual practice: Husserl, as Levinas reads him, proves his method “by putting it to work”<sup>31</sup>; the task of

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later comment, about the opacity of method to the one deploying it, likely derives from personal experience.

<sup>29</sup> The reader is once again referred to Drabinski's excellent work on method in Levinas, *Sensibility and singularity*. See also Drabinski, “Sense and icon: the problem of the *Sinngebung* in Levinas and Marion” in *Emmanuel Levinas: Critical Assessments*, vol. 2, 106-122. Originally published in *Philosophy Today* 42, supplement (1998): 47-58.

<sup>30</sup> It is worth underlining that Levinas is explicitly speaking of Husserlian methodology, and considers the field of phenomenologists to be modifying and appropriating Husserlian methodology, not Heideggerian: “The phenomenologists are not linked by theses that Husserl had formally pronounced [*énoncées*] [...] A manner of working brings them together. They agree to approach questions in a certain way, rather than in adhering to a certain number of fixed propositions” (RTP 111/RPT 91); and Levinas lists his aim as desiring “despite the richness of analyses and depth of views that many remarkable works of phenomenology have contributed despite the war in France, Germany, and elsewhere—to mention a few of these elementary movements of thought that come to them from the Husserlian manner” (RTP 112/RPT 92). This is consistent with Levinas's tendency to see Heidegger as ultimately carrying through one consequence of Husserlian thought to its end. See for example OEH 52/WEH 87; see also TeI 15/TI 44, where Levinas, criticizing Heidegger, explicitly renders him a logical result of Husserlian phenomenology's promotion of the horizon as playing the role that the concept had played in classical idealism. (Note: this does not mean that horizon *consistently* plays this role, which is, I think, the major, if implicit, point for Levinas.)

<sup>31</sup> “Mais la façon dont elle fut pratiquée depuis les *Logische Untersuchungen* qui l'avaient <<prouvée en marchant>> [...]” (RTP 111/RPT 112). See also RR's comment that “the *Logische Untersuchungen* [...] defined phenomenology so badly, but [...] proved it so well, for they proved the thought as one proves movement—by walking [*en marchant*]” (RR 128/RoR 113).

the methodological investigator is to identify what assumptions and ideas are actually at work consistently and “quasi-spontaneously” (RTP 111/RPT 91).

What strikes Levinas about Husserlian method, as it can be disengaged from his analyses, is that “phenomenology is a method in an eminent way, for it is essentially open” (RTP 111/RPT 91). Levinas means that it is not a method that belongs to one localized discipline or field of intellectual endeavor, and this places it on a level with mathematical physics, dialectic, and Freudian psychoanalysis (RTP 111/RPT 91). From this it follows that simply listing a group of theories and ideas will not capture what Husserl is doing, even if these theories are integral to phenomenology, because they are “in reality, the elements of a system rather than a way leading to the discovery of that system. They hold good for method like every knowledge of being holds good for method. If one takes them for rules of a method, they appear as too formal” (RTP 112/RPT 92).

The *way* in which these elements appear is the phenomenological reduction, whose positive description Levinas undertakes only in pieces, in order, as he says, simply to bring out “a series of gestures that fix [...] the physiognomy of a thinker [...]” and let him or her appear as proceeding in a Husserlian fashion (RTP 112/RPT 92). It is a *way* that Levinas seeks to identify in Husserl's specific theses: *how* did Husserl arrive at the propositions and phenomenological 'axioms' (as it were) that Husserl developed into a theoretical system?

In a negative vein, Levinas does not consider phenomenology to be a deductive

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method—the movement between notions does not involve movement from a higher order concept to a lower, does not involve reference to an explanatory principle (RTP 112-113/RPT 92). Nor does it involve an attempt to extract or abstract a notion from phenomena, in order then to sever such a notion from its phenomenal origin, at price of equivocity among notions (RTP 113/RPT 93). There is no hierarchy of truths over the facts from which they are induced (RTP 113/RPT 93); nor does description attempt to give the sense of a phenomenon by recourse to the ideas of perfection and imperfection. This phenomenological premise we have seen at work in Levinas's own work already, as spurring his drive to reanalyze the notion of evil.

Phenomenology also refuses naïve and direct vision of an object: it moves from the abstract object toward the way in which it was constituted as having such and such an appearance, etc. (RTP 115/RPT 94). Hence if one wished to flesh out the slogan of phenomenology (“To the things themselves!”), Levinas would say, “*The return to the acts where the intuitive presence of things is revealed is the true return to things*” (RTP 115/RPT 95). From this it becomes possible to say that because the presence of the being is its being present in truth to me, that access to the object is part of the being of the object (RTP 115, 117/RPT 95, 97; RR 134/RoR 119). Hence, if phenomenological research inquires into the concrete sense of beings, then “[t]he phenomenological manner consists in rediscovering these ways of access—all the forgotten and traversed evidences” (RTP 116/RPT 96). As we shall see later, in chapters four and five, the forgotten access to, or 'horizon' of, phenomena like goodness is the relation to the other person as *alter*,

and the very movement of thought by which systems of ideas are established and put into play depend upon the fact that others affect subjectivity in a specific manner.

The reduction by which Husserlian phenomenology moves is the attempt to name a way of proceeding—neither deductive nor simply dialectic in its “return into ‘positivity’”<sup>32</sup>—that allows forgotten “evidences” and horizons to be rediscovered, so that the sense of a being can emerge, which is other than its objectivity, which is another, more abstract and naïve sense of the being.

Given this method, if one reads Husserl’s own work phenomenologically, what are its “forgotten evidences,” or, as Levinas puts it elsewhere and with more hesitation for the objectivizing flavor of all such terms, “horizons” (IM 138/IaM 123)? Or rather, which of the indefinitely many forgotten horizons concerns Levinas the most in his Husserlian retrievals? On Levinas’s reading, the horizon that most *troubles* Husserl, and which returns again and again to unsettle Husserl’s analyses of *objectivating* intentionality,<sup>33</sup> is

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<sup>32</sup> Levinas writes that the phenomenological way of proceeding, which does not find the sense of a limited being by inscribing the being in a hierarchy of perfect and imperfect being, gives “a resolutely dialectical appearance to its [phenomenology’s] descriptions” (RTP 114/RPT 93-94). Is this really dialectic? It is not clear, but Levinas does relate this quasi-dialectical aspect of phenomenology to the genesis of philosophies of ambiguity, in which the internal contradictoriness of concepts marks the moment in phenomenology in which the finite is grounded as independent of the infinite (RTP 114/RPT 94), and he notes that the independence of the finite from the infinite is the mark of post-Kantian philosophy. Yet such philosophies are, Levinas writes, the way in which “a thought that wants above all else [*veut surtout*] to grasp itself without exceeding itself—for every exceeding proceeds for it most often from irreflection, prejudice, opinion—from non-philosophy” (RTP 114/RPT 94). Levinas at this point says nothing more about the thought that desires to understand itself without exceeding itself or without *being exceeded* (in this instance, the ambiguity of *se dépasser*—is it passive? Is it reflexive?—is perhaps the whole point, both meanings being intended by Levinas). Yet it is difficult to think that Levinas did not insert this line as a tacit marking of the point at which phenomenology is ontological, remains strictly bound to its own being, remaining thereby submitted to the impersonality and horror of presence and the time of the instant.

<sup>33</sup> In some cases, whether or not Husserl admits that the intentional mode he analyzes is objectivating. See for example Levinas’s reading of Husserl’s *Ur-Impression* at AE 39-43/OB 31-34, where he shows that Husserl’s description of the *Ur-Impression* goes well beyond what objectivating intentionality can sustain,

sensibility (RTP 115/RPT 95; RR 126-127, 132/RoR 112, 117; IM 139-140/IaM 124-125).

Reading Levinas's interpretation of Husserl, one has the impression that Levinas sees Husserl as backing into the importance of sensibility, which importance is dissimulated—not only for readers, but for Husserl himself—by Husserl's strongly scientific orientation.<sup>34</sup> This scientific orientation toward beings was in part corrected by Husserl's turn toward subjectivity, toward consciousness, but it also confused many because of an underlying assumption, common, on Levinas's reading, to positivist prejudices, that “the things themselves” are revealed in their truth when we attend strictly to the noematic pole of an intention. Hence Levinas poses the question: “Why this return to the description of consciousness? Would it be 'interesting' or 'instructive' to know, outside of the ideal essences the subjective acts that grasp them?” (RR 128/RoR 114)

There are, Levinas proposes, two ways of reading Husserl's answer to this question. One is explicitly given by Husserl: one needs to know the sources of fundamental concepts, to bring them back to that level where they are clear and distinct enough for a pure logic to be articulated “on the plane of the theory of knowledge” (RR 129/RoR 114, citing the *Logical Investigations*). One could take this answer at its face value, and say then that Husserl turns to consciousness in order to elicit a pure logic that

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and yet Husserl continues to speak of the subjectivity born in the instant of the *Ur-Impression* as a theoretical, and so objectivating consciousness. The late fragments on kinestheses, which Levinas analyzes in IM, are another example of an attempt to describe subjectivity in an intentional relationship other than objectivating.

<sup>34</sup> As we saw above in our reading of OEH, Husserl's interest in science is noted by Levinas as very present throughout his teacher's works.

will allow for a rigorous epistemology in which the subjective (but not psychologicistic) is recognized to be the final horizon of the “in itself” [*en soi*] of the object (RR 129/RoR 114). Such a project—which would be highly problematic for any philosophy that understood a subject to be a sphere of immanence, closed off from exterior being<sup>35</sup>—would demonstrate the superiority of phenomenology, based on its intentional subject, over traditional epistemology.

Levinas, however, argues for a different interpretation of the turn to consciousness and its structures: admitting that the above reading is certainly defensible, he raises a counter-possibility:

Unless every interest in the announced inquiry, instead of bearing on the correlation subject-object which would define intentionality, flowed instead from another dynamism that animates intentionality. Its true enigma would not consist in the presence before objects, but in the new sense that this inquiry permits giving to this presence (RR 129/RoR 114).

He will make similar arguments elsewhere,<sup>36</sup> always basing himself on Husserl's extension of the notion of intentionality beyond objectivating consciousness, which Husserl inconsistently will still attempt to call consciousness, and on the notion that the subject's *situation* is essential for the constitution of a new sense of the subject's presence before beings. The situation of consciousness—the subject of subjectivity—as other than

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<sup>35</sup> Here we find already a difference between Levinas's reading of Husserl in 1940. There, he had argued that intentionality was the structure characteristic of a monad, whereas Heidegger's being-in-the-world described a being immediately overflowed by existence (OEH 50/WEH 85). Here, Levinas is saying that the project Husserl conceives of, even *before* Levinas argues for a second, more radical interpretation of Husserl's turn to the examination of consciousness, *is a problematic endeavor for any monadic conception of consciousness*. This claim seems to imply that Husserl's phenomenology is not now interpreted as monadic *with respect to beings and being*.

<sup>36</sup> See for example IM 137/IaM 122, RR 135/RoR 120-121.

an idealist subject (i.e., other than an enclosed monad, other than thought that transcends being<sup>37</sup>), becomes *the* forgotten horizon of the constitution of the sense of intentionality.

Levinas thus reads Husserl as sensitive to a non-objectivating movement that the subject, in its very objectivation of the object, makes, and which contributes essentially to the revelation of the sense of the being. This sensitivity is not consistently worked out in terms appropriate to its non-objectivating character, and so often has to be freed up from Husserl's own terminology,<sup>38</sup> but Levinas sees in Husserl's inconsistency a symptom of his dedication to pursuing the things themselves, and to the constitution of their sense, which does not allow him to be content with having described objectivating intentionality as the movement of sense-constitution. Levinas will analyze this tacit discontent by

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<sup>37</sup> To clarify somewhat: Levinas sees Husserlian phenomenology as trying to avoid, in its radical and original moments, affirming the metaphysical primacy of objectivity. If objectivity is *the* primary concern of metaphysics or phenomenology, then inevitably, phenomenology will be unable to avoid to “giving an opinion” about transcendence, namely that the sense of transcendence is precisely the object's being outside of the subject, which can be translated as a rather objectivizing and *insensitive* interpretation of the difference between thought and being. See IM 138/IaM 123.

<sup>38</sup> Hence Levinas writes of Husserl's interest in “the transcendental”: “[t]he renewal of the *transcendental*, **which perhaps masks the recourse to the term 'constitution'**, appears to us as an essential contribution of phenomenology” (RR 127/RoR 113, my emphasis in bold). Or again: “[F]or Husserl, the movement of consciousness going toward its object, dissimulates another movement that one would like to call subjective—since it does not result in objects—but which one cannot so call, because it is not a simple reflux of the psychical ‘mass,’ but remains intentional, concerns this sphere, *other* than the oneself of the subject where, for Husserl, objects are finally situated. This sphere is sketched as the *horizon* of objects or as their background—inappropriate terms, however, for to designate as horizon or as background the plane into which the intentional movement dissimulated by objectivation issues is to subordinate this movement to objectivation and to find in it not other truth than that of the transcendental condition of the object” (IM 137-138/IaM 122-123, my emphasis in bold). Or again: “**Certainly**, before beginning the phenomenology of the kinetheses and of the body—intentionality par excellence—**Husserl, in his notes on space, makes the mental reserve characteristic for all his philosophy when it is engaged in the concrete**: it returns for an instant to the pure Ego [*Moi*] of the Reduction [...]. **But one is in the right to ask oneself how Husserl understands in the final account the way in which the self takes itself for ... Is this taking for... a purely theoretical act of a disincarnate being?**” (IM 143/IaM 128, my emphases in bold). Levinas continually has recourse to such questions and to points of discontinuity or contradiction in Husserl's writing, and consistently reads it as the conflict of Husserl, the programmatic scientific thinker, with Husserl, the anti-doctrinaire phenomenological investigator.

separating out for attention this other dynamism that is discernible in objectivating intentionality itself. He will show that it is not a movement of conscious subjectivity as objectivating *Sinngebung*, but of sensible subjectivity, and he will argue use this point to argue that this dynamic excess of intentionality implies that sensibility is central for all Husserlian phenomenology.<sup>39</sup>

The link between intentionality and sensibility then becomes the key to the success of intentionality in preventing the reduction of being to thought or thought to being, the counter to the ever-present threat of the temptation to reinscribe the defining gesture of phenomenology's original enemy, psychologism, within phenomenology. Psychologism, or its primary gesture, on Levinas's reading, is that movement of thought by which subjectivity becomes a thought enclosed "inside" without exits, and whose capacity to grasp the truth of being, which is not at all thought, is therefore uncertain (IM 137/IaM 22). Insofar as sensibility or the body articulates intentionality ("*par excellence*" [IM 143/IaM 127]) as a transcendence of "consciousness" toward a being,"<sup>40</sup> sensibility also prevents both the domination of beings *by* the subject, which would *only* know them,<sup>41</sup> by representing them in accordance with its own *a priori* structures, *and* the inverse phenomenon, namely, the reduction of subjectivity to the rank of a peculiar object

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<sup>39</sup> The centrality and subversive significance of sensibility for Husserl's phenomenology is a point that Levinas returns to in all three essays and can fairly be said to be the center of gravity of Levinas's reading. See, for example: RTP 112, 115/RPT 92, 95; RR 126-127/RoR 112; IM 118-119/IaM 98-99, 143/128.

<sup>40</sup> Which is not transcendence in any objective sense but what Husserl, on Levinas's reading, means by "transcendental. On the importance of the Husserl's focus on the transcendental, see IM 138-139/IaM 123-124.

<sup>41</sup> As opposed to maintaining other modes of relation with them.

among objects or being among beings.

For sensibility renders intentionality a non-uniform relationship: within itself, intentionality is structured by a counter-movement, or is troubled by a movement—or better, by a motivation—that exceeds the objectivating dimension of its contact with being. This movement is generated by “the transcendental function of sensibility” (IM 139/IaM 124), i.e., by the sense-constituting function of sensibility which certainly makes possible objective sense, but is not limited to objectivation of beings, and it gives new meaning to the idea that intentionality is transcendence. Intentionality is transcendence not because it reaches objects, it is transcendence because it transcends its own objectivating movement by being, precisely, an animated body (IM 142/IaM 126-127).<sup>42</sup> And it is because of this other movement at work in objectivating intentionality that Husserl, on Levinas's reading, turns his attention from the constitution of objects to the constituting subjectivity, as a “situation” or “horizon” of sense that is neither naively realist nor idealist, but somehow other than both (IM 137-138/IaM 122-123). Indeed, on the basis of his reading of Husserlian phenomenology, Levinas claims that “[s]ensible experience is privileged because in it the ambiguity of sense constitution plays out, where the noema conditions and shelters the noesis that constitutes it” (RR 134/RoR 119).

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<sup>42</sup> Levinas writes that Husserl claims that consciousness aiming at an object, i.e., intentional consciousness, exceeds “in every instant that which, in the very instant, is given as 'explicitly aimed at' [...] *This exceeding of the intention in the intention itself*, inherent in every consciousness must be considered as essential [*Wesensmoment*] to this consciousness>> (p. 40 of CM). <<The fact that the structure of every intentionality implies a 'horizon' [*die Horizonstruktur*] prescribes to the analysis and to phenomenological description an absolutely new method>> (p. 42 of same)” (RR 130/RoR 115). Hence the intrinsic exceeding of intention *within* intention pushes phenomenological analysis beyond objectivation and objectivity; sensibility as the site of this intentional excess moves to the fore of consideration.

Hence, Levinas, evaluating Husserl's turn toward subjectivity, and his concomitant (on Levinas's reading) interest in the rehabilitation of the transcendental, writes:

The constitution of the object is already sheltered by a pre-predicative “world” that, however, the subject constitutes; and inversely, the sojourn in the world is only conceivable as the spontaneity of a constituting subject, without which this sojourn would have been simply a belonging of a part to a whole and the subject, a simple product of a terrain. The floating between the disengagement of transcendental idealism and the engagement in a world with which we reproach Husserl is not his weakness, but his strength. This simultaneity of liberty and belonging—without any of these terms being sacrificed—is perhaps the *Sinngebung* itself, the act of giving a sense which traverses and bears being [*l'être*] as a whole (RR 133/RoR 118).

Husserl, in turning his attention to subjectivity as—if not a forgotten then an underemphasized—horizon by which sense is constituted, discovers that subjectivity is a body, and that the body is neither merely a moment in the gnoseological apparatus of idealism nor simply engagement by being (one senses here that Levinas has in mind the fatality of being, the subjection without remission to existence with which he reproached Heidegger and all of fundamental ontology). The body is intentional, in the sense that it articulates a belonging to the world, which is also a liberation from it: this double structure of belonging and liberation, Levinas proposes, *is* the *Sinngebung*. Sense constitution *is* the way of being both liberated from being and worldly. Being and subjectivity, taken “transcendentally,” mutually condition each other, without being reducible to each other or *deducible* from each other or from some greater whole (RR 134/RoR 119). Indeed, *to condition* is itself a relationship only conceivable as



“transcendental”;<sup>43</sup> objective notions of it ultimately will lead to either deduction or dialectical reduction in which the terms liberty and belonging simply *become* each other, resulting either in an idealism in favor of the abstract freedom of the subject or else an idealism in which subjectivity is objectified.

What of the dialectic of presence and absence that Levinas finds at work in Heidegger's ontology, and which Levinas challenges with the ontological reduction to *il y a*? What of the time of the instant that Levinas analyzed earlier in his career as the situation of the bodily subject? Can we find these movements in Levinas's reading of Husserl, or locate the point at which Husserlian phenomenology and Heideggerian fundamental ontology should come into proximity, and so conflict? Or have Levinas's investigations into Husserl's works supplied him with the capacity to counter his own ontology (let alone Heidegger's)?

It is not clear that they have. With regard to the matter of time, although Levinas already has recourse to Husserl's analyses of inner time consciousness, his concern is with their retentional-protentional structure, which dissimulates the situation of the sensible subject. Retention and protention, on his reading, belong to thought as consciousness, as an immobile reflection which, whether fulfilled or disappointed, is in any case *always* accomplished as thought, and which, by virtue of being accomplished

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<sup>43</sup> So I take Levinas to interpret Husserl, given his claim that the rehabilitation of the transcendental is phenomenology's “great contribution,” and that sensibility, intentionality, and the reduction notions that “do not complete each other mutually as fragments of a puzzle, but condition each other transcendently” (RR 134/RoR 119). The latter claim seems to identify what the transcendental uniquely allows one to say and conceive, and to justify the idea that to rehabilitate the transcendental is a contribution to philosophy.

prior to the object, determines the conditions under which a being may appear (IM 139-140/IaM 124-125). By contrast, the time (which Levinas in his 1959 essays identifies as an instant) of the animated and mobile Husserlian body, in which what *should* be an “immobile” (because absolute) transcendental Ego *moves in a corporeal kinesthesia*—this temporality of animate sensibility, as Levinas reads it, lags behind the hyletic *datum*, which is absolutely given (IM 139/IaM 124).

It is important to note that this instant is different from the instant that Levinas had described in the post-war 1940s—the ontological instant of sensible identification, rather than the phenomenological instant of sensible transcendence. The ontological instant Levinas had described is undergoing a change, or else a new kind of instant is being analyzed: the brief analyses of the role of the *Ur-Impression*, we find that the *Ur-Impression* enters into consideration as the *now* modified by sensibility as it situates itself with respect to itself, as the “zero point” of situation (RTP 119/RPT 99). But this *now* by which subjectivity situates itself as the zero point of all relations, orients subjectivity and makes possible a world. So on the one hand, the instantaneous now of the *Ur-Impression* is a relation of subjectivity to itself, as commencement and origin, and in this it bears similarities to the ontological instant, which is also commencement (but no more than commencement). But unlike Levinas's ontological instant, it does not fail to attain to a world, for it implies “an incarnate geometry” (RTP 119/RPT 99). Not until after *Totality and Infinity* will Levinas reread the *Ur-Impression* and interpret it as a site of instability in Husserl's thinking of the constitution of conscious subjectivity, as suggesting again an

excessive dimension in the body-as-intention.<sup>44</sup>

For the present period, however, what is confusing in Levinas's analysis of the kinesthetic moment of subjectivity is that it is not clear whether the transcendence (transcendental transcendence) of kinesthetic intentionality is temporally articulated (by casting movement as having to respond to an exteriority that is not an object), and that upsets the transcendental mutuality or simultaneity of the time of my “giving” and of my being “given” (RR 132/RoR 117), or whether it is the difference between the transcendental ego [*le Moi*] and the spatialization of (operated by) the body, which Levinas describes as “the passage from Ego to Here [*le passage de Moi à Ici*]” (IM 141/IaM 126). Although time is on the horizon, as it were, it has not yet been discovered—or rather, in Levinas's recourse to Husserl's work, he has not yet discovered it—as a way of parsing Husserl's analyses of kinesthetic subjectivity so as productively to orient those analyses toward the situation of the (largely) forgotten, dissimulated sensible subjectivity. For if sensible subjectivity is the situation of objectifying consciousness, sensibility itself is situated and oriented by a motivator in a way that requires a new temporal analysis to help articulate. We will see the consequences of this failure in the way that temporality and fecundity play out in *Totality and Infinity*—essentially, a repetition of his sketch in *Time and the Other*.

As for *il y a*, one might not be surprised that there is no mention of this phenomenon in Levinas's reading of Husserl during the 1950s. If I am correct as to

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<sup>44</sup> See chapter five below, pp. 228-233.

Levinas's motivations for retrieving Husserl, if his work with Husserl is an attempt to discover how phenomenology operates in a mode exceeding ontology, then if *il y a* emerges from the analyses of a phenomenological ontology,<sup>45</sup> it logically would not appear for phenomenological analysis inasmuch as Levinas is examining how Husserlian phenomenology maintains subjectivity's liberation from *simply* belonging to being.

Still, the question of how Levinas would confront the ontology of enchainment and of presence from this Husserlian phenomenological perspective remains unclear. Elements of his analyses here will carry forward: the account of the time of the body as sensitive and responsive, and the transcendental status of the body will appear again in *Totality and Infinity*, and above all, Levinas will retain the methodological mandate of Husserlian phenomenology to seek the forgotten horizons of sense. He will take Husserl's work as a warrant to attend to subjectivity as originally sensibility, as maintaining a *bathing* relationship with other beings (IM 139/IaM 124), and as *motivating* the disposition of subjectivity as objectivating intentionality confronted with a being.<sup>46</sup> Husserl's work will help to nuance and complicate Levinas's analyses of worldly existence, by comparison with those he had made in *From existence to the existent* and *Time and the other*, where the point was to determine whether the world's ontological function could be said to be the constitution of the sense of beings inasmuch as the world

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<sup>45</sup> Why phenomenological ontology? Because *il y a* defies the dialectical ontology of presence/absence, correlating with being/nothingness.

<sup>46</sup> That sensibility motivates objectivating intentionality does not imply that it *only* motivates objectivation, simply that in the context of rereading Husserl, Levinas has to account for objectivating intentionality and contend with it.

held beings *in relation to being* [*Sein*] (DEE 68/EE 36-37).

There remains one other comment to make of Levinas's analyses of Husserl, and it concerns the presence of the vocabulary of “same” and “other” that appears especially in “Intentionality and metaphysics,”<sup>47</sup> and which seems to derive more from Levinas's own decision, in *Time and the Other*, that alterity is an extra-ontological mode of existing or being in relation. Given that “other” can signify my body (apparently with respect to the transcendental Ego) or existents equally suggests that Levinas has not yet determined, despite his writing manifesto, “Is ontology fundamental?” (1951), the scope of the term “other” or alterity, or perhaps has not yet determined which senses of alterity and other are pertinent to the attempt to articulate the sense of goodness, or which avoids reduction to an ontological relationship. Or perhaps it would be fairer to say that the relationship between the alterity who invokes me by name, and whom I invoke by name, and the alterity of individual existents, has not yet been determined.

This may explain why the social relationship, although present in “The ruin of representation,” as an intentionality other than objectivating, seems to arise suddenly—just as it did in *From existence to the existent* and even in *Time and the Other*, and as Levinas himself contends it does in Husserl's own work: “With Husserl himself, in the constitution of intersubjectivity, undertaken based on objectivating acts, social relations, irreducible to the objectivating constitution that claimed to cradle them in its rhythm, brusquely awaken” (RR 135/RoR 121). No sooner has Levinas said this than the article

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<sup>47</sup> E.g.: IM 139/IaM 124, 142/126, 127; 143/127.

ends, as abruptly as the social relationship had “awakened” in the analysis of the work which, as Levinas had said at the beginning, constituted the enigma of the man, Husserl (RR 125/RoR 111). The final paragraphs of the essay are the only place in these three retrievals of Husserlian thought where the relevance of his phenomenology to discovering the horizons of ethical sense explicitly arises. In the wake of “Is ontology fundamental?,” that Levinas suggests, however, hesitantly, that “[t]hat Husserl himself had had second thoughts [*ait vu cet esprit de l'escalier*] under forms of objectivating and fully actual acts of reflection (in virtue of what privilege?) has not perhaps been determining for the influence of his work” (RR 135/RoR 120) is astounding and a clear sign that for him, there is in Husserl's work and *way of working*<sup>48</sup> an aspect that points to horizons which exceed Levinas's reading of even the non-objectivating horizons of sense opened by the Husserlian phenomenology of the body.

But from his study of Husserl, Levinas has found that the body as moving, as animated flesh that *is* the intentional excess beyond objectivating intentionality, is central to the investigation of lost horizons by which sense arises. If the body has yet to open the horizon of the social in its most original or authentic sense, the body as sensibility will furnish the starting point for Levinas. Although he had always attended to the body in his own work, whether in doing dialectical or phenomenological ontology, the significance of the body for sense constitution as well as for exposing the structure of evil had not

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<sup>48</sup> “Is it solely by chance,” Levinas asks, “that philosophy in teams is a Husserlian idea?” (RR 135/RoR 121); and again, “In a phenomenology where the activity of totalizing and totalitarian representation is already placed in horizons that, in a way, it hadn't wanted [...] becomes a possible ethical *Sinngebung*” (RR 135/RoR 121).

been explicitly affirmed. What remains is to determine whether or how alterity and the body articulate the good beyond being, what the consequences are for existence or being as such in its ontological articulation as depersonalizing presence.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE SUBJECT OF BEING

#### Introduction

With *Totality and Infinity*, we arrive at what is commonly agreed to be Levinas's first mature philosophical work. At issue in my reading of it is the question of whether we can still find in this work the *effective* presence of the fatal ontology that Levinas had worked out in the 1930s and 1940s. The fatal ontology, as discussed in chapter two, arrives at ontological difference *immediately* in a timeless instant (DEE 136/EE 79):<sup>1</sup> it articulates a direct, unmediated relationship between anonymous being and hypostatic subjectivity, whose inexplicable upsurge is what achieves ontological difference (TA 31/TO 51). Thenceforth, being is able to be analyzed into a polarized relationship between *il y a* as an eternal present without individuals that returns and has constantly to be localized into *this individual being*. *Il y a* is not a *concept* of being that the individual would individuate, nor, on Levinas's reading, is the individual being *Da-Sein*, as if there were a differentiated field of existence—life and a living world—where the individual would first be. Rather, the individual is *here* (DEE 118/EE 66), in relationship to anonymous presence, accomplishing only this rupture with endless presence. The reiteration of localizing or “mastering” existence by the individual existent burdens the

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<sup>1</sup> See chapter 2, pp. 75-76, 92-93.



existent like fate: the “fatality of being” (DEE 101, 171/EE 57, 104) is at once unavoidably mine, and so definitive of me, and yet indifferent to me and my needs and desires. Hence the convenient term “fatal ontology.”

By *Totality and Infinity*, however, very little of this fatal ontology appears to be operative—this despite occasional references at key points to *il y a*,<sup>2</sup> and Levinas's continuation of the argument that transcendence is transcendence *of being*. Levinas's contention that transcendence transcends being is justified by the fatal ontology, which had first prompted Levinas to consider relationships with alterity as transcending the fruitlessness of ontological difference, since relating to alterity accomplished more than ontological difference. The outbreak of futurity was a sign of this, as was the irreducibility of the world's continuum of instants to the timeless dialectic of instant and eternity. In *Totality and Infinity*, the reason being is *problematic*, and requires escape, is not articulated in the same way. Instead, it is *worldly* being, in all its variety and individuality, that is problematic, and subjectivity's self-identification within the field of elemental, worldly being that must be transcended through the relationship with the other. Yet it is unclear that Levinas is fully entitled to such a schema, given the ambiguity of the priority of my constitution as a subject of being and the priority of my constitution as a

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<sup>2</sup> Including the synonyms “apeiron” and “anonymity,” *il y a* occurs at Tel 115/TI 141, 116/142, 132/158-159, 133/160, 137/163, 142/167, 150/175, 151/176, 165/190-191, 166/191, 171/197, 202/226, 236/259, 239/261, 246/268, 248/270, and 257/280. In general, Levinas refers to *il y a* in relation to elemental being and places the erotic relationship with the feminine other in close proximity to a *il y a*. The elemental relationship, as we shall see, is central to the self-identification of subjectivity, such that it signifies “the Same” in every relationship, and the erotic relationship with feminine alterity is a highly ambiguous moment in which a genuine break with self-identification is groped toward unwittingly by the lovers (Tel 235-236/TI 257-259), in what is clearly a transplantation of Levinas's earlier analysis of sexual difference as otherwise than the ontological difference that constitutes the fatal ontology.

subject in relation to alterity.

Levinas devotes a great deal of time to analyzing how I come to self-identify, and be constituted as “the Same” in relation with being; he also analyzes at length the way in which the alterity of the other manifests itself from itself (TeI 161-225/TI 187-247),<sup>3</sup> rather than from any worldly context (by which the self would be able to make it a moment of its own self-identification, as we shall see shortly in our examination of self-identification and what it means) (TeI 81-158/TI 109-183). *Both* of these analyses rely on Levinas's appropriation and extension of Husserlian phenomenology of kinesthetic, bodily subjectivity, which we analyzed at length in the previous chapter, and will in a few moment revisit in order to see briefly what he has appropriated and how, as well as deal swiftly with certain questions that Levinas's argument with Husserl raises.

Ultimately, the significance of Levinas's relationship with Husserl lies in the way that Levinas's appropriation of Husserlian bodily subjectivity<sup>4</sup> upsets the notion that the sense of being can be (or should be) considered apart from the relationship with alterity. To the degree that my relationship with alterity is prior to my relationship with being, and my relationship with being (my being a subject of being) has no sense and cannot succeed in constituting me as subjectivity without the relationship I sustain with alterity,

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<sup>3</sup> “Kath' auto” as Levinas puts it from time to time, e.g., TeI 21/51, 36-37/65-66, 39/67, 47/74-75.

<sup>4</sup> Specifically, kinesthetic, bodily subjectivity's dependency on alterity—on the alterity of worldly being (which Levinas calls “relative” alterity), as well as of *autrui* (whose alterity is called “absolute”). Husserlian sensibility, as Levinas analyzes it, is not necessarily sensitive immediately to such differences in order to be a dependent, self-identified subjectivity; Levinas's philosophy, on the other hand, relies on being able to discriminate between different modes of alterity (relative and absolute), because the claim is that they function differently, and constitute subjectivity differently.

it is unclear that (a) being, in its being or presence, articulates an evil impersonality that is insurmountable and from which I must escape, or (b) that being—even *il y a*tic being in its few appearances in the text—yields the major problem to which the transplanted phenomenology of *eros* must respond.

### Levinas's Debt to Husserl

Levinas's relation with Husserl in *Totality and Infinity* is complicated; moreover, its centrality has not always been appreciated:<sup>5</sup> the polemics with Heidegger and Hegel have tended to provoke greater interest.<sup>6</sup> In the Anglophone world, Levinas was introduced largely through Derrida's interest in his work, which has led to interpretations of Levinas through the lens of Derrida's relationship with his thought.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See the introduction of Drabinski's *Sensibility and Singularity* for an overview of the general trends of interpretation of Levinas's relationship with Husserl, which can be summarized as follows: (1) displacement: Heidegger, not Husserl, is decisive for Levinas's phenomenology, even if Levinas later returns to Husserl; (2) Husserlian phenomenology is present and operative in Levinas's thinking, but Levinas's decisive philosophical insight into the significance of alterity derive from some other figure, such as, for example, Rosenzweig; (3) Husserlian phenomenology exists merely as a terminology that is surpassed by a non-phenomenological philosophizing in Levinas's work. In all of these cases, the relationship with Husserl is relegated to a secondary importance and so given little attention.

<sup>6</sup> Readers who have tended to privilege Levinas's relationship with Heidegger would include Tina Chanter (2001), E. L. Thomas (2004), Jean Greisch (1987), Silvia Benso (2000), Jacques Taminiaux (1997, 2008). Curiously, one commentator who does not share this Heideggerian prejudice is Jacques Derrida, who, in "Violence and Metaphysics" (1964), devotes a great deal of time to exonerating Husserl of Levinas's charges, which suggests that he recognizes the importance of Husserl's thought for Levinas. Husserl and Hegel seem to weigh equally in Derrida's interpretation of Levinas.

<sup>7</sup> Some readers, such as Robert Bernasconi (1991) and, to a degree and at certain times, Simon Critchley (1991) and Robert John Sheffler Manning (2001) have tended to read Levinas and Derrida together, as usefully criticizing each other; this has tended to lead to the conclusion that Derrida over time moved closer to Levinas's "ethical metaphysics" of saying and said, alterity and sameness. See, for example, the editors' introduction to *Re-reading Levinas* (1991), in which the impact on English-speaking philosophers of Derrida's reading of *Totality and Infinity* is appraised (xii-xv), as well as Critchley's and Bernasconi's individual contributions to this collection. See also Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1999). Others, such as Martin Hägglund (2004), have argued strenuously for the incompatibility of Derrida with Levinas.

This section does not claim to settle any of those debates. Its purpose is simply to try to establish Levinas's debt to Husserl in his analysis of the Same-Other relationship in *Totality and Infinity*, with an emphasis on the Same, and to determine the nature of his criticism of Husserl, which is not altogether clear. This obscurity has not gone unremarked: Derrida, who recognized the central debt of Levinas to Husserl in “Violence and Metaphysics,”<sup>8</sup> argued against both Levinas's reading of Husserl's work, and his appropriation of it, as both flying in the face of facts concerning Husserlian phenomenology that, as Derrida points out, Levinas himself had acknowledged in other writings on Husserl. On Derrida's reading, Levinas's critique of Husserl would be uncharitable and false on the one hand, while on the other his appropriation of phenomenology would merely pay lip service to it while illegitimately—and knowingly, on Derrida's reading—separating method and content in order to claim Husserlian method as if it were a mere instrument, in order then to reject at no cost nearly all of Husserl's conclusions.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics” in *Emmanuel Levinas: Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers*, eds. Claire Katz and Lara Trout, vol. 1 (New York: Routledge, 2005), 88-173. See especially pp. 96-97, 127.

<sup>9</sup> Derrida, *ibid.*, 127, 129-134. Dominic Janicaud makes a similar criticism of Levinas for what he calls the “aplomb” with which Levinas claims phenomenological method, while forcing this claim to conceal the importation of theological discourse. See Dominic Janicaud, “The Theological Turn of French Phenomenology” in *Phenomenology and the “theological turn”*: *The French debate*, trans. Bernard G. Prusak (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 16-103. Levinas would be pretending to phenomenology, in some sense, on both Derrida's and Janicaud's reading. Derrida, too, recognizes the central importance of “the Most High” in Levinas's thinking of the trace, and clearly recognizes a theological tendency; whether he considers this to be a primary problem, or whether he would consider the contamination of philosophical discourse by a non-philosophical (according to contemporary lights) discourse to be intrinsic to philosophy and unproblematic just insofar as one “gives oneself the right” to speak philosophically (Derrida 125) is unclear, however.

My aim is not to defend Levinas from Derrida. While acknowledging the violence of Levinas's reading, to understand how Levinas proceeds with his analysis of the subjectivity-being relationship in *Totality and Infinity*—i.e., how one becomes a subject of being in a way that is different from the hypostasis of the 1940s—requires looking at how Levinas reads Husserl and what he *does* take up from him. And in this, we find a silence in Derrida: markedly absent in his analysis is an attempt to uncover precisely how Levinas appropriates Husserl's method and in what sense he remains in close communion with an analytic sphere marked out by Husserl. Derrida's strategy consists in rereading Husserl and highlighting points where Husserl should meet Levinas's criteria—points which, Derrida often stresses, are not unknown to Levinas—and in then denying Levinas's claim to be doing Husserlian phenomenology. The strategy's successes attest to the strangeness and seemingly hypocritical relationship Levinas maintains with Husserl. The denial of the claim to practice a form of Husserlian phenomenology, however, does little more than attempt to return Levinas's claim that method is not a tool (and hence its results are not separable from it in the way that, say, a birdhouse is separable from different sets of tools used to construct the same artifact) against him by stressing the difference in outcomes as proof against the legitimacy of Levinas's claim to Husserlian phenomenological method.

As criticism goes, this is less than satisfying; but it does raise the question of precisely in what Levinas's “methodological” Husserlianism consists. A response to Derrida should include a reading that shows how Levinas works with Husserlian method

and problems. To make such a full and convincing demonstration is beyond the scope of the present work.<sup>10</sup> My reading is more restricted. Its aim is threefold: (1) to identify those elements of Husserl's work that Levinas has identified as centrally important in his rereading of Husserl, and which he incorporates into his analysis of subjectivity in *Totality and Infinity*; (2) to show the consequences of those appropriations for Levinas's account of being and the problematic of the fatal ontology. Finally, (3) an analysis of Levinas's debt to Husserl should account for the central fact that inspires Derrida's rebuke, namely that Levinas's opposition to Husserl, especially in *Totality and Infinity*'s second section, "Interiority and Economy," does seem to ignore the fact that he had already found much of what he opposes to Husserl in *Husserl's own work*. Why, then, does Levinas criticize Husserl as if what he has to say were simply absent from Husserl's work?

For one can easily identify elements of Levinas's reading of Husserl in 1959 that are carried forward into *Totality and Infinity* and put to work:

(1) Subjectivity is not (first) ahistorical consciousness or Reason, but a sensitive body, or "sensibility," whose mode of being is *movement as having been moved* (IM 139/IaM 124), which in *Totality and Infinity* appears as the irreducible dependency of sensibility for its "arousal" on another (TeI 91-92/TI 119).

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<sup>10</sup> Once again, Drabinski's work is welcome because it engages in precisely this sort of extended reading of Levinas as a Husserlian thinker. A more limited, but useful, reading of Levinas's analysis and use of Husserl's writings on sensation and sensibility can be found in J. Libertson, "Levinas and Husserl: Intentionality and Sensation" in *Tijdschrift voor filosofie* 4, no. 3 (1979): 485-502.

(2) The structure of sensibility *exceeds* representation, which had been in 1959 characterized as *immobile* (IM 140/IaM 125). Again, Levinas does not elaborate the structure of sensibility in kinesthetic terms per se,<sup>11</sup> but the difference between alterity and sameness can be seen as proximate to relations of being-moved (by another) and relations of being, not simply *unmoved*, but *immobile* (same). The Same is, as Levinas claims, the term that serves only to enter a relationship, without ever departing from its place within that relationship to occupy the other term (TeI 6/TI 36).

(3) The excess of representation, and of objectivating intentionality, is not *another* intention, but the motivational structure *of* representation and of the movement of objectivation proceeding on the basis of representation (IaM 137/IM 122). Because intentionality is bodily sensibility, its structure as sensitivity, suspended in a field of the non-self, it is moved to enjoy, but also to think—i.e., to the unexpected fact of conscious intentionality, in which this conditioning dependency on the non-self is transmuted into the spontaneity of self-conscious identification.<sup>12</sup> Representational intentionality is exceeded or “ruined” from within by its own motivating movement (RR 130/RoR 115), *because* intentionality is bodily.

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<sup>11</sup> Although there are traces of the mobility/immobility dichotomy: e.g., when Levinas notes that “Happiness [*bonheur*] where we already move by the simple fact of living is, in fact, always beyond being [...]” (TeI 85/TI 113).

<sup>12</sup> This is the famous “anteriority of the posterior” in which consciousness takes itself to be originary and spontaneous. See Libertson's reading of Levinas's handling of this notion in the 1950s at Libertson, 491-493. See also Fabio Ciarraelli's “The riddle of the pre-original” in *Ethics as First Philosophy*, ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak (New York: Routledge, 1995), 97-94.

This last point is obscured by Levinas's claim that enjoyment is a “wholly other” intentionality than representation (TeI 98/TI 126);<sup>13</sup> however, this phrasing seems to me exceptional. The most reasonable interpretation of it is that it is abstract, that it has not adequately situated itself with respect to the relevant phenomena and analyses. For elsewhere, Levinas is clear that only an abstract reading of enjoyment and of theoretical intentionality that objectivates on the basis of representation, allows enjoyment and theoretical intentionality to be considered as separate and opposed to each other:

What is the relationship between the theoretical intentionality of the objectivating act, as Husserl calls it, and enjoyment? [...] Taken in itself, in some way uprooted, representation seems to be oriented in a direction [*sens*] opposed to that of enjoyment [...] *although representation in reality be woven from it* and although it repeats the event that is separation [...] (TeI 95/TI 122-123, my emphasis).

Here, it seems clear that Levinas is making a twofold claim that should prevent dissociation of theoretical intentionality and enjoyment: (1) enjoyment and representation have the same direction rather than an oppositional one because (2) representation is composed (“woven”) of enjoyment. That is to say, representation issues from enjoyment without being uprooted from it—representation *includes in itself* enjoyment, or *is an act of enjoyment as well as a moment facilitating knowledge*. In another passage, he claims of the relationship between thought and its condition that

the originality of the situation is due to the fact that the conditioning occurs [*se produit*] at the heart of the relation of representing to represented, of constituting to constituted—relation that, on a first approach, one finds in every fact of consciousness [...]. This gnawing on things [...] measures the surplus of this

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<sup>13</sup> “Representation is *linked* to a ‘wholly other’ intentionality which we will try to approach in all this analysis.”



reality [...] over every represented reality, [...] which is the way in which the self [*moi*], absolute commencement, is found suspended in the non-self [*non-moi*] (TeI 101-102/TI 128).

The condition that lies at the heart of theoretical intentionality is essentially a motivation, structured by an irreducible difference between that which motivates and the motivated one, and which is not *foreign* to intentionality, even if its structure is other than representational. The condition that conditions representation articulates the way in which thought is, essentially, a body “suspended in the non-self.” This is why it lies “at the heart of” the polarized theoretical intention of representing and represented. It is the horizon, as it were, of representation, or its condition. Theoretical representation, which, on Levinas's reading, Husserl makes essentially correlate with intelligibility (TeI 99/TI 127), transcends its condition inasmuch as it is able to take itself to be spontaneous in its constitution of its own condition; at the same time, however, the movement of abstraction inherent in representation depends absolutely on the motivational moment of theoretical intentionality itself, as Levinas had discovered in rereading Husserl's own work. The condition of thinking is bodiliness in the midst of alterity, is the irreducibility of sensibility sensitive to and dependent upon equally irreducible alterity.<sup>14</sup>

If we conceive of enjoyment and theoretical intentionality in these terms, then Levinas's claim in the preface that “the presentation and development of the notions

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<sup>14</sup> Of course, this simply raises the key question: if Levinas speaks of sensibility as always irreducibly dependent upon alterity, but says this in the context of interiority's relationship with elemental existents, then should we not follow Derrida, Sallis, Critchley, Benso, and many others in saying that elemental alterity, which has *il y a* at its back, should be accepted as having a constituting function in relation to the self on a par with the ethical alterity of the face? If there is no responsivity that is not already responsibility, then what prevents one from reading the responsivity of bodily subjectivity as a responsibility for the elemental?

employed [in *Totality and Infinity*] owe everything to the phenomenological method” and his location of that method in intentional analysis<sup>15</sup> becomes less puzzling. For we can see how Levinas's conception of intentionality is indebted to Husserl's work, and in which direction Levinas seeks thought's—and sense's—unsuspected horizons, as Husserl himself had done.

All of which leads us back again to the central question about Levinas's relationship to Husserl: if all of these points derive from Levinas's reading of Husserl, and are capable of being found in Husserl, why does Levinas contest with him, and as if all of what he has said is not to be found at all in Husserl (TeI 94-100/TI 122-127)? I think the key to answering this question lies in Levinas's claim that “[t]he thesis according to which every intentionality is either a representation or founded on a representation dominates the *Logical Investigations* and returns like an obsession in every later work of Husserl” (TeI 95/TI 122). On Levinas's own reading of Husserl, there are, as we have seen, many occasions when Husserl goes beyond this thesis, yet it continually returns “like an obsession.” This return of the primacy of representation, which is too rigidly correlated with intelligibility, is “the privilege of representation” (TeI 95/TI 122). It is this privilege of representation that Levinas contests, and perhaps all the more just because Husserl's own better insight is incapable of *effectively* countering this privilege. Hence Husserlian subjectivity, on Levinas's reading, would remain *effectively*, despite

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<sup>15</sup> “[I]ntentional analysis is the research of the concrete. The notion, taken under the direct regard of the thought that defines it, is revealed however as implanted, unbeknownst to this naïve thought, in horizons unsuspected by this thought; these horizons give it a sense—this is the essential teaching of Husserl” (TeI xvi/TI 28).

alternate and more original analyses of it, *consciousness* structured by representational intentions.

Ultimately, though, Levinas's interpretation of the motivational structure of intentionality in *Totality and Infinity* is not limited to a working out of what he had found in Husserl in terms of content or in terms of the overall problematic. Drabinski has argued that Levinas is working within the problematic of the constitution of sense as a problem of genetic phenomenology (Drabinski 24-26, 47), and this seems to me a reasonable and illuminating interpretation. The account of the genesis of sense that Levinas gives, however, while responding to a Husserlian problem, and seeking the lost horizons of sense (which are horizons, as he had already found, other than simply objective or existential, but have crucially to do with the *situation* of subjectivity), go beyond the terms of Husserl's work, and beyond his project.

For Husserl's concern to establish the structure of sense is oriented toward establishing and securing the conditions for scientific truth in the wake of the collapse of German idealism and the rise of positive sciences;<sup>16</sup> Levinas's concern is to establish the conditions of sense in light of the tendency to locate sense in historical conditions, which on his reading is both alienating (TeI 203/227) and hostile (TeI 204/TI 228), for such conditions seem to offer the alternative of silence or violence within structures that are wholly indifferent to personality. For Levinas, it is a matter of showing a non-dominating

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<sup>16</sup> See Michael Bowler, *Heidegger and Aristotle*, 27-54. As has been noted already, Levinas is not insensitive to the scientific motivation of Husserlian thought. His own problem, however, is not dedicated to securing truth for the positive sciences, although he recognizes that he cannot simply ignore it, or offer a philosophy that would ruin the possibility of scientific truth.

mode of social intercourse: critique as the ethical movement of sense itself, but not as an anonymous logical reflux. Rather, the movement of sense is constituted as a relationship of persons who cannot be reduced to parts or moments of the self-exhibition of rational or irrational totalities, where truth as disclosure of being would *suffice* to generate sense.

Yet given that both my self-identification in relation to elemental alterity and my relationship with personal alterity depend upon Levinas's appropriation of Husserlian sensibility as the situation of conscious subjectivity, it is unclear whether the difference between elemental alterity and personal alterity can be separated from each other in the constitution of subjectivity. Levinas depends upon my self-identifying relationship with elemental alterity to be prior to any other relationship; this would seem to say that it suffices for me to be subjectivity, and the priority of my relationship with worldly being would seem to suggest that the relationship with the other opens a future hitherto beyond me and my powers. The relationship with the other does indeed open as a future, yet it is not clear that this temporality is appropriate given the way sensibility is structured in relation to alterity as *moved* by it, which suggests that the other should open a *past* that is new and beyond me, not a future, and that my relationship with personal alterity as motivating me must seriously qualify the sense and priority of my relationship with elemental alterity (i.e., being) as motivating me.

### ***Totality and Infinity and the Fate of the Fatal Ontology***

With these points in mind, we are led to the evaluation of the consequences of Levinas's shift to base himself on sensibility construed in a very Husserlian fashion.

Already, in light of the final point made above, one begins to wonder whether we have not departed from the problem that had motivated Levinas in the 1930s and 1940s. The fatal ontology, as we saw in chapter two, was aimed at articulating the evil of being as intrinsic to the very accomplishment of being in general, to its positive presence, and it resulted in the problem of escape from being. Is Levinas's work in *Totality and Infinity* consonant with this project and problem?

That Levinas believes that it is can be inferred from his 1981 interview with Philippe Nemo, in which he insists that the problem of escape is answered by the “deposition of sovereignty” that occurs in relationship with the Other as “the dis-inter-ested relation. I write it in three words to underline the escape from being it signifies,” Levinas says, and goes on to claim:

It is in the form of such a relation that the deliverance from the 'there is' appeared to me. Since that compelled my recognition and was clarified in my mind, I have hardly spoken again in my books of the 'there is' for itself. But the shadow of the 'there is,' and of nonsense, still appeared to me necessary as the very test of dis-inter-estedness (EI 51/EaI 52).

His self-evaluation, then, insists upon the continuing relevance of *il y a* and the fatal ontology, on the problematic of escape from being. Dis-inter-estedness, which occurs as a relationship with the face of the other person, seems to Levinas “to stop the anonymous and senseless rumbling of being” (EI 51/EaI 52). We will have occasion to test this claim over the next two chapters.

The analysis of being in the 1940s, and the articulation of ontological difference as an immediate relationship between pure, unindividuated presence and individual

subjectivity set up the problem of escape from being as a salvation of subjectivity from an evil *of* being. If hypostasis made me a subject *of* being (DEE 109-145/EE 61-86; TA 31-34/TO 51-55), and so subject to its evil, depersonalizing modality, relationships with alterity were initially argued to be an escape and salvation of the subject from being. Escape came as a fruitful future engendered with<sup>17</sup> the other, whose contact with me draws me beyond the constitution of ontological difference and allows my life to signify differently.

Does this situation—the problem of being, and its resolution for the subject of being in relation to a future constituted with and by the other—still obtain in *Totality and Infinity*? Does *il y a*, as one paradoxical “term” of ontological difference as it was constituted in the 1940s still generate the sense of the problem that being presents to us in 1961? Does the existent as subject of being still come to be a subject in an immediate relationship to anonymous, *il y a*tic being? Is being *still* a problem, or is it still problematic in *Totality and Infinity*? Or does the new analysis of sensibility, borrowed from Husserl and modified, require a shift of the governing problem and even of the locus of that problem? Since the way into Levinas's analyses, and access to the sense of being, come through the constitution of sensible subjectivity, let us move into an examination the rise of subjectivity in relation to being, and try to determine how this subject signifies as a subject of being.

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<sup>17</sup> Those less sanguine about Levinas's reading of sex might say, “engendered *in*” to mark out the role by which alone the sense of the female sex is forced to signify by this analysis.

### I am the Same: Becoming the Subject of Being

To be a subject in *Totality and Infinity* is to be the same. At issue, then, for the genetic phenomenologist, is the nature of sameness and its genesis *in situ*. Sameness is not a simple fact given immediately, but the capacity to remain the same throughout every alteration (TeI 6-8/TI 36-38): “To receive nothing from the personal Other [*Autrui*] unless that which is in me, as if, from all eternity, I possessed that which comes to me from outside. To receive nothing, or to be free” (TeI 13-14/TI 43). To receive nothing from the other save what I have already in me is to be the same. To be free is to be myself without being affected by anything outside of me—which consequently requires that all that is outside of me depend upon me or conform to the terms of my being-free. Sameness and freedom thus coincide, with the consequence that my remaining the same and being free amounts to the subjection of every other being to my power as a self-identified being, by which my freedom is guaranteed.

#### My freedom as subjectivity

does not resemble the capricious spontaneity of the free will. Its ultimate sense is due to this permanence in the Same, which is Reason. Knowing [*connaissance*] is the deployment of this identity. It is freedom. That reason be in the final account the manifestation of a freedom, neutralizing the other and surrounding [*englobant*] it, cannot surprise, since it is said that sovereign reason knows [*connait*] only itself, that nothing other limits it (TeI 14/TI 43).

That reason in its sovereignty knows nothing but itself betrays, on Levinas's reading, the link between freedom and identity or sameness far better than the caprice of the free will, whose inherent changeability suggests a lack of identity, a determination from without

that presupposes a dissolute self.<sup>18</sup> This link between freedom and identity requires that the other appear only within the system of knowledge visible to the self's regard, which free subjectivity itself constitutes (TeI 6-8/TI 36-38). This is what it means to receive *nothing* from an other but what I have already in myself. Within such a visible system, the alterity of the other outside of me is reduced to a set of limits imposed by the other's position within a greater whole (TeI 8, 9/TI 38, 39): its alterity becomes, in other words, the form of its identity, but this identity derives strictly from the being's delimitation in relation to other members of the system. The system itself *is* the manifestation of freedom as the totality of knowledge that makes beings available *for me and on my terms*.

At this point, we must pose a question about this sovereign self of reason: is the self's own identity constituted on the basis of its position within a whole? If it were, then its identity would be the effect of its location within a visible totality. Levinas, however, argues that the identity of the self is not equivalent to that of the other beings that it knows: "To be me is, beyond every individuation that one can owe to a system of references, to have identity as a content" (TeI 6/TI 36). Instead of being due to a system of references that limit each other and so define each other, the identity of the self is "identity *par excellence*, the original work of identification" (TeI 6/TI 36).

What is the character of this original identification? Does to have identity as a content mean to be simply the same, without changing in any way? Not at all: rather,

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<sup>18</sup> Levinas will in fact rehabilitate the caprice of the free will, not in itself as justified, but as testifying to a conviction that affect is not simply irrationality as unjustifiability (TeI 193-195/TI 217-219). This does not justify caprice so much as demonstrate its condition in a structure whose justification and sense are otherwise constituted than by sovereign reason.



“[t]he Self [*Moi*] is identical just in its alterations” (TeI 6/TI 36). Levinas writes:

The identification of the Same in the Me [*Moi*] does not show up [*se produit*]<sup>19</sup> as a monotone tautology: “I am I” [*Moi c'est Moi*]. The originality of identification, irreducible to the formalism of A is A, would thus escape attention. It is necessary to fix it not in reflecting on the abstract representation of a self by itself [*soi par soi*] (TeI 7/TI 37).

The idea that the self could be identical without ever changing is an abstract self-representation that the self can perform for itself.<sup>20</sup> Levinas argues that in order properly to conceive the originality of the self's identification,

[i]t is necessary to start from the concrete relation between a self [*moi*] and a world. The latter, strange and hostile, should, in all good logic, alter the self [*moi*]. Now, the true and original relation between them and where the self is revealed precisely as the Same *par excellence*, occurs as *sojourn* in the world. The *manner* of the Self [*Moi*] against the “other” [*<<autre>>*] of the world, consists in *sojourning*, in *identifying oneself* [*s'identifier*] by existing [*en existant*] there *at home* (TeI 7/TI 37).

It is in relation to the world that the self undergoes changes and identifies itself. And yet, despite its intrinsic reference to the world as its “other,”<sup>21</sup> the changes the self undergoes in responding to the world do not undo its identity. The self remains itself and in its *concrete* relation with the world, its identity cannot be said to be determined or defined by its position within the worldly whole or a system. The self's sameness is not the result of its delimitation by other beings in the world-system, but somehow comes from itself in

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<sup>19</sup> On translating *se produire*, see Bautista and Peperzak, “Unspoken Unity: I, Who Desire and Enjoy” in *Totality and Infinity at Fifty*, eds. Scott Davidson and Diane Perpich. Forthcoming from Duquesne University Press.

<sup>20</sup> The significance of that abstraction has not yet come to light, and at this moment does not interest Levinas.

<sup>21</sup> Note that the world as other is an other whose alterity is marked out as problematic by the quotation marks within which Levinas encloses it.

its very contact with worldly alterity: the self's identity is a *self-identification in relation to the world*. And this self-identification is the very “manner” of the self, its way of being, against the alterity of the world.

What of the alterity of the world, which ought “in all good logic” to alter the self, but fails despite enabling in some fashion the self to change and alter itself? The world as other is a dwelling *place*: “a place where *I can*, where, dependent upon another reality, I am, despite this dependence, or thanks to it, free. It suffices to walk, to *do* in order to seize oneself in every thing [...]” (TeI 7/TI 37). The world as other offers the self a place in which the self can find itself in any relationship with a worldly being, and this support that the world-other offers nevertheless—somehow!—does not reduce the self to a moment of its own being or a part of it. Instead, as noted, the world exists in a relationship with the self that is sufficient for the self's identification, allowing every worldly relationship to function in the self's self-identification. For no other existent does existing in the world suffice to identify it; only the self enjoys such sufficiency, which is possible only because its existing *is*—somehow!—self-identification with respect to every other being.

We seem both close to and far from Husserl, as Levinas reads him: on the one hand, the self-world relationship clearly shows the incapacity to reduce either term to a moment of its other in this relation, which implies that the sense of both terms and of any other term related to them is dependent not on *either* self *or* world, but on self-world (in that order, however). This looks very much like the transcendental mutuality that Levinas

had been investigating in the 1950s, and it provides a warrant for examining the situation of subjectivity more closely as intrinsically important to the genesis of sense.

The self as same (the Same as always and only *self*-same) is, on Levinas's interpretation, situated as *sojourning* in the world, which places its identification outside of the bounds of representation. We are rather on the plane of sensibility. Yet where, in the 1950s, sensibility had seemed to be the opening of relations of alterity that did not fall into the immobility of consciousness, it seems here that that claim has been modified, at least as regards its signification: the sensible self constitutes itself *as* the Same, as an absolute position whence it never can depart. The sojourning self is its self-identifying, for the “alterity of the self and of the inhabited world is only formal,” i.e., delimited by a system I articulate *somehow*, and which “falls under my powers in a world where I sojourn” (TeI 8-9/TI 38). Conceptual, physical, and emotional force—the panoply of violence, on Levinas's reading—are encompassed within “my powers” (TeI 14/TI 44).

Three points bear mentioning here: (1) with respect to the fatal ontology, we note immediately that the self's self-sameness arises in relation to the world, not in direct relationship with pure presence nor in the self's relationship with itself via a place that accomplishes *only* the bare or schematic self, so far as this preliminary and rather formal description shows. (2) At the same time, Levinas claims that the self who self-identifies “is not a contingent formation thanks to which the Same and the Other [*Autre*—logical determinations of being—can in addition be reflected *in a thought*. It is in order that alterity show up [*se produire*] *in being* that a 'thought' is necessary and that a Self [*Moi*]

is necessary” (TeI 9-10/TI 39).<sup>22</sup> The self in its self-sameness and identity is, despite its reduction of alterity to identity within the sphere of its own identification, necessary for alterity to show up *in being*. This is why Levinas first addresses the identity of the self under the heading “The rupture of totality,” where totality is in some fashion aligned with being. By implication, the sameness of the self is not ontological, is not reducible to being or relations with being. At the same time, the self is a manner of existing, a mode of being. What does it mean to hold in addition that sojourning can also accommodate Levinas's claim that “[t]he Same is essentially identification in the diverse, or history, or system. It is not me who refuses myself to the system, as Kierkegaard thought, it is the Other [*Autre*]” (TeI 10/TI 40)? This reminds us of the dictum that one cannot leave monadology and expect to escape monism, i.e., one cannot escape the logic of absolute self-sameness and expect to escape an impersonal sameness. The Same is thus an ambiguous formation in terms of its sense. (3) Finally, with respect to the need to substantiate the difference between the identity of the self and the identity of other beings, it remains at this stage unclear what this self-identification is, or how it proceeds. What does it mean to “sojourn” in the world, or to be “at home” there, and so beyond constitution by a totality that is visible to an onlooker?

### Self-identification and the Elemental: The Situation of Subjectivity

Self-identification occurs in relation to the world—to being in a certain mode that

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<sup>22</sup> Here, Levinas, in identifying the self as “thought” is using a more Husserlian language in order to contest its claims.

“appears” or whose structure becomes analyzable at the level of sensibility's functioning, which accomplishes an event other than *simply* being or knowing. As we saw above, sensibility “sojourns” in the world. To sojourn in the world and identify oneself in and through it is, among other powers, to have the *capacity* to represent everything, and even oneself, to oneself.<sup>23</sup>

Husserl, on Levinas's reading, focuses on this capacity to an unwarranted degree: as we saw above, representation underwrites and makes effective much of Husserlian intentionality. Levinas reads representation as establishing a polarized intentionality—theoretical intentionality—in which the noema is given to me across a distance. But why should the sojourning self represent anything?

On the one hand, we have already seen from Levinas's reading of Husserl in 1940 that representation and theoretical modes of knowing enable my *Sinngebung* to go uncontested, which secures my freedom from historical being, and so from determination by anything other-than-rational. It avoids subjecting human beings to existence irremissibly or fatefully because it is eminently *reason*. And since the self is consciousness, and consciousness in knowing a being is reason, this means I am only affected by myself, despite the fact that the noematic being does not in the end come from me. Representation identifies me, is a mode of my self-identification. On the other hand, another way of reading the question, “Why should the sojourning self represent

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<sup>23</sup> A cautionary note is in order: it is true that the sojourning self has the capacity to represent even itself to itself (TeI 95/TI 122-123). This does not mean that that is the *only* act it can perform, or its sole capacity, nor even its most original movement; yet that subjectivity can represent everything including itself is a significant fact *about* the sojourning subject.

anything?,” is to read it as a question about the character of the self, such that representation is possible for it. Does sojourning only accomplish a representing reason, or does the representational capacity of subjectivity depend on another mode of being myself than representation?

In 1959, Levinas had argued that Husserl's writings showed that the situation of the subject of objectivating or theoretical intentionality was other than simply representational. On his reading, as we saw in chapter three, representation-based intentionality revealed itself to be transcended<sup>24</sup> by its own motivation. Examination of the structure of the motivational moment of representational intentionality revealed that the situation of subjectivity was not originally to be at a distance from its objects. Rather, subjectivity was immersed within a field of sensibles: sensibility sustained *bathing* relationships with sensible being (IM 139/IaM 124).

In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas takes up this structural point once more. Subjectivity that sojourns in the world is immersed or bathes in alterity, in the “non-self” (TeI 116/TI 143). This structure is significant because subjectivity which bathes is not a subject before objects:<sup>25</sup> it is sensibility amid sensible beings. Hence Levinas describes the sojourning intention as a feeling: “enjoyment,” which evidently then serves as the motivating movement of intentionality that transcends its own objectivating structure.

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<sup>24</sup> Not in Levinas's eventual sense of this term, but meaning simply that representation as a mode of knowing could not account for itself. One required recourse to the motivation of representational intentionality, which was structured differently from the representational intentionality it motivated.

<sup>25</sup> Nor an object among other objects.

From this it is evident that the self of enjoyment is other than speculative Reason or detached, on-looking consciousness: enjoyment is not representational thinking (TeI 101/TI 128), for it is not first of all *thinking* (TeI 100, 111, 112/TI 127, 137, 139). It cannot be described in its originality on the basis of intelligibility structured either by theory or practice (TeI 85/TI 113).

Enjoyment articulates a relationship of subjectivity to others.<sup>26</sup> This relationship first of all positions me (TeI 111/TI 138), i.e., localizes my sensibility (TeI 111/TI 139): enjoyment is feeling *in a position*,<sup>27</sup> is a “standing there in”<sup>28</sup> (TeI 111/TI 138-139). The logical question is: In what? Levinas calls the worldly alterities that sensibility encounters “elements” or “the elemental” (TeI 104/TI 131). The element as factual or existential alterity is a mode of being that does not show up in relation to sensibility as a bounded entity that subjectivity could approach as if the self were outside of the elemental other. So long as subjectivity is first of all sensibility and described strictly in terms of

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<sup>26</sup> One can infer that Levinas means “elemental” alterity, which will be discussed below. However, it is important to note that *nothing* in what Levinas has written so far about sensibility's structure requires that the other be elemental. Likewise, nothing requires that the other *not* be elemental. The basic structural point, that sensibility requires motivation, which implies a relationship that comes from some other, is insensitive to the difference between absolute and relative alterity.

<sup>27</sup> Levinas insists: not feeling my position, but feeling as occurring always in place, or feeling from out of a position (TeI 111/TI 139). Here again, we recognize both Levinas's earlier analyses of the importance of position for hypostasis, but the tone and the overall analysis has shifted and arguably owes more to Levinas's rereading of Husserl's interest in sensibility and embodiment than it does to his own fatal ontology. See chapter three above, pp. 119-136.

<sup>28</sup> “Ce rapport de moi avec moi s'accomplit, quand *je me tiens* dans le monde qui me précède comme un absolu d'une antiquité irréprésentable. [...] [J]e *m'y tiens* comme dans un absolu. S'y tenir, précisément diffère du 'penser'.” Compare Levinas's reading of the self in relation to the hyletic given in “Intentionality and metaphysics”: “In no way is the instant retained or pro-tained thought. The 'retaining' or the 'protaining' do not remain immobile like in objectivating intention; they *follow* that toward which they transcend themselves, are determined by that which they retain or pro-tain” (IM 140/IaM 125).

sensibility, it is not possible for the worldly other to assume an objectified, distant mode of being in relation to the subject, for sensibility is a feeling mode of being; elements are the felt of feeling.<sup>29</sup>

Expanding on what he had written two years earlier of Husserl's kinesthetic feeling-felt relationship,<sup>30</sup> Levinas claims therefore: “One does not approach the element. The relation adequate to its essence discovers it precisely as a milieu: one bathes in it. I am always interior to the element” (TeI 104/TI 131). When subjectivity is not interpreted as equivalent to consciousness, but instead is reduced to sensibility, then subjectivity, as a feeling or affective existence, finds itself bounded by its feeling on all sides enveloped. That which envelops subjectivity is an absolutely indefinite field through which sensibility moves without discovering an end of this field, only variations in sensation (TeI 104-105/TI 131-132). Sensibility reveals me as being inside of the elemental other.

For this reason, Levinas also says that in enjoyment, when one intends an element, the element is “[c]ontent without form” (TeI 104/TI 131), by which he means that we are not dealing with “a *something*, with a being [*étant*] manifesting itself as refractory to qualitative determination. Quality is manifested in the element as determining nothing” (TeI 105/TI 132). Form implies a bounded whole, something that would be visible to us from an external perspective, at a distance, and which we could go

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<sup>29</sup> Or rather, not a *purely* objectified mode of being. See pp. 169-172 below.

<sup>30</sup> “The subject bathes in it [*y baigne*—i.e., in the sensible] before thinking or perceiving its objects. In the sensible certainly Husserl distinguishes anew between feeling and felt, but the felt, at this level, is not a quality of an object responding as object to an empty intention— in order to accomplish it or disappoint it. The feeling of the felt does not consist here in equaling an anticipation” (IM 139/IaM 124).



around and view from different sides. At the least, form appears with an appresented other side, which we could know about, even if we could not attain a perspective that would manifest that other side directly. Enjoyment does not know, however, and so it does not make manifest forms. Rather, enjoyment intends the qualitative character of its other, which Levinas calls “content” by way of using a traditional contrast to drive the point home: elements are *not* objects in any traditional philosophical sense, and we do not relate to them as knowing beings.

That we are not dealing with an object, but with a field in which we stand, also explains why, with respect to an element, “[a]ll points of view are equally good” (*tous les points de vue se valent*) (TeI 104/TI 131): one might also say that, with respect to the determination of the *truth* of the elemental milieu, they are all equally bad, since there is no point of view *on a definite object or being*, which would allow us to determine that one point of view is more useful than others, depending upon which view gave the being more faithfully, i.e., with less distortion or partiality, allowing us to see it in its truth.

Consequently, bathing, since it is not truth-disclosive in character, but sensible enjoyment (TeI 105/TI 132), is indifferent to any “technical finality that organizes [beings] into a system” (TeI 104/TI 130). Enjoyment relates elements rather to my needs, intending them as aliments (TeI 101-102/TI 128-129),<sup>31</sup> which engage me prior to any initiative of mine (TeI 111/TI 137). Perspectival perception, in its theoretico-practical

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<sup>31</sup> Needs are not to be thought of as states of being that *happen* to occur to an already coherently identified being. The significance of need will be addressed later, but for the moment, we need simply to understand that elements relate to me as aliments that are occasions either of satisfaction of need or repulsion and dissatisfaction.

mode, where sensibility functions as a structure of intelligibility, is not operative in enjoyment, unless as a content *to be enjoyed*.<sup>32</sup> We are not concerned with either the truth or the objectivity of beings, but with how they feel, whether they *satisfy*. As a result, thought

does not fix the element as an object. The element, pure quality, stands outside of the distinction of the finite and the infinite. The question of knowing what is 'the other side' [*"l'autre face"*] of that which offers us one, does not arise in the relation maintained with the element. The sky, the earth, the sea, the wind—they are sufficient (TeI 105/TI 132).

Because elements are not objects related to ends, but aliments related to need, they are sufficient in themselves as either satisfying or dislikable, revolting, painful, loathsome, etc. Sufficiency here indicates the positive sense of the failure to pass to a system of thought, or to any practico-technical system of manipulation. The relationship of elements to need, as either lovable or loathsome, occurs immediately and because it does, halts the move to interpolate them into a system or to interpret them.<sup>33</sup>

But elemental sufficiency is not only due to their failure to refer to the finality of a means-ends structure, or to any system or totality, but to their failure to refer to the infinite.<sup>34</sup> That is to say, elements in their sufficiency to my need do not direct me either

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<sup>32</sup> Everyone knows the satisfaction that comes of having learned to perform some task that leads to a better understanding of that which was worked upon. The understanding that comes of the work, and which orients my efforts, is itself ultimately a content on which I live, which gladdens and nourishes my life.

<sup>33</sup> This tendency of the element to arrest any appeal to another horizon than that of enjoyment evidently is similar to Jean-Luc Marion's analysis of the idol versus the icon. Element and idol arrest subjectivity's intentionality; and implicit in Levinas's claim that the elemental is figured by the mythical gods is the charge of paganism and so of idolatry. See Marion, *God without being* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 9-14.

<sup>34</sup> The implications of this claim have generated controversy among scholars, for, having argued that

to an intelligible horizon beyond that of sensible satisfaction (which would refer us to finitude and definition, to contexts that would delimit) or to an interlocutor (which would refer us to the infinite) or to God.<sup>35</sup> Elemental existence blocks the move to either truth or the other person just insofar as I relate to elements as aliments, which is to relate them strictly to my *needs* as satisfying qualities (TeI 88, 118-120/TI 115-116, 144-146). *In this sense, we, upon reflection, judge that they are radically finite, without their ever betraying, **within enjoyment**, that lack of reference to exteriority.* Hence we determine reflectively that their exteriority to my body remains an interiority with respect to the self-identifying movement of subjectivity.

But in the midst of bathing in the elements, we make no such judgment:<sup>36</sup> rather,

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enjoyment places us radically *inside* the world, and inside with respect to elements, Levinas can argue that enjoyment is not equivalent to ethical alterity for it is not a transcendence, not a relating to the infinite. I have mentioned Silvia Benso's work as seeking to retrieve a differently ethical alterity through a confrontation with Levinas and Heidegger, in order to be able to speak of ethical relationships with things. Other authors, such as John Sallis, have tried to argue that Levinas himself, in his descriptions of *il y a* and the elemental, furnishes the evidence required to contradict his own claims about the familiarity of things. Sallis argues that Levinas unwittingly reinscribes German Idealism's determination of the thing into his description of the elemental: "the determination by which to comport oneself to an object is to appropriate the object, that is, to cancel its otherness and affirm its sameness with oneself. As in eating. As if, contrary to what Heidegger's analysis (the very analysis from which Levinas so insistently differentiates his own) shows, things could not withhold themselves from appropriation. As do, for instance, the sky and the earth" (356). See John Sallis, "Levinas and the Elemental" in *Emmanuel Levinas: Critical Assessments*, vol. 1, 352-359.

<sup>35</sup> God is also the absolutely other: "Desire without satisfaction [...] *intends* the distance, the alterity and exteriority of the Other [*Autre*]. For Desire, this alterity, inadequate to the idea, has a sense. It is intended as the alterity of the personal Other [*Autrui*] and as that of the Most High" (TeI 4/TI 34). But "[t]he absolutely Other [*Autre*] is the personal Other [*Autrui*]" (TeI 9/TI 39). For a discussion of the difficulties this equivalence has created, see Derrida, *op. cit.*, 104-116, and Bautista and Peperzak, *op. cit.* For an argument that Levinas does not fail to distinguish between the alterity of God and the alterity of human beings, see Christina M. Gschwandter, "The neighbor and the infinite: Marion and Levinas on the encounter between self, human other, and God" in *Continental Philosophy Review* 40, no. 3 (2007): 231-249.

<sup>36</sup> Therefore it bears underscoring: when Levinas claims that the elemental milieu is "discovered" as milieu by bathing in it, he does not occupy the stance of bathing. Discovery, as a relationship of beings with the being of a being in relation either to subjectivity or to *Da-Sein*, is a moment of knowing, and so of

in enjoyment, “[t]his bit of the world, universe of my daily comportment, this town or this quarter or this road where I act [*évolue*], this horizon where I see, I am content with the face that they offer me; I do not found them in a vaster system. It is they who found me” (TeI 111/TI 137). The sufficiency of the elemental implies that the “position [of enjoyment], absolutely without transcendence, does not resemble the comprehension of the world by the Heideggerian *Da*” (TeI 111/TI 138), for it does not place me in relation to unworldly references, as ontological comprehension does.

In light of the analyses above, it is evident both that enjoyment, for Levinas, is not of itself oriented by or an instance or (merely a) moment of comprehension or intellection; *and* that although enjoyment is a relationship with a certain existential alterity, i.e., elements or (as a field) “the elemental” (TeI 104/TI 131), elemental alterity ultimately does not relate me to the alterity of a person, who would exceed absolutely (infinitely) the alterity of the field within which I stand, as well as my own self-identification in relation to that field.

I do not find myself, then, before a totality of beings or being when I enjoy—I cannot. It is structurally impossible to rise to the level of an image or speculative representation of a whole: “sensitivity is not a blind and mad reason; it is before reason [*elle est avant la raison*]; the sensible is not at all in relation to the totality on which it is closed [*sur laquelle il se ferme*]” (TeI 111/TI 138). The fact that sensitivity exists as

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systematic relationships. On his own phenomenology, however, Levinas is not entitled to import this relationship into the heart of bathing intentionality; he can only state that bathing “discovers” the milieu as milieu inasmuch as he reflects on (neutralizes) that relationship.

identified to itself, by itself, as personality constituted in relation to the elemental field (TeI 88/TI 115),<sup>37</sup> marks the independence of sensibility's identity from the identity it could have as a part of a whole; it also marks the independence of that identity from the relationship with the other [*autrui*]. Levinas calls this identity in enjoyment the separation of the self, which is separate in two directions: on the one hand, it is separate from impersonal systems or totalities; on the other hand, it is separate from the other [*autrui*], who has no involvement in my relationship with the elemental (or at least, this is the implication).

Although totality is a major motif of *Totality and Infinity*, it plays largely a negative role in the identification effected by enjoyment: it is *not* that by which or in which or for which the self identifies itself (TeI 5-6/TI 35-36). In terms of the positive character of self-identification, it is the alimentary relationship with elements that is important. Alimentation or nourishment occurs in the course of my consumption—in one fashion or another—of the aliments that “found” me, and modifies the alimentary elemental other:

Nourishment [*nourriture*], as means of reinvigoration, is the transmutation of the other into the Same, which is of the essence of enjoyment: a foreign energy [*une énergie autre*], recognized, as we will see, as sustaining the very act which is directed toward it, becomes, in enjoyment, my energy, my force, me. All enjoyment is, in this sense, alimentation (TeI 83/TI 111).<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> “The personality of the person, the ipseity of the self [*du moi*], more than the particularity of the atom and of the individual, is the particularity of the happiness [*bonheur*] of enjoyment.” Personality means ipseity, i.e., happiness in its singularly lived modes.

<sup>38</sup> This claim is repeated at TeI 102/TI 129, where Levinas adds, “[b]y labor and possession the alterity of nourishments enters into the Same.”

The self who enjoys the alimentary other is sustained in the very act of nourishment by the element, and empowered by it.<sup>39</sup> The other becomes me, yet I am moved by this other and so not simply unchanged by the transmutation. I *enjoy*. I become myself (again) or find myself anew in every such transmutation.

It is this nourishing, empowering aspect of enjoyment that distinguishes enjoyment from participation in pure being: although enjoyment is an immersion, and is not theoretical consciousness but feeling, sensibility (TeI 112/TI 138-139), in enjoyment, unlike in participation, I am not assimilated to that which engages me.<sup>40</sup> The alimentary element is assimilated rather to me; there is a transmutation of the other into the same. Joy is an excess over merely being that I experience in the consumption of existential reality; joy founds me rather than *confounding* me by confusing me with that engaging reality. Although I fuse with the alimentary other, that merger is in my favor, and promotes me over the other—I am founded and sustained by the element. “[E]njoyment is an exaltation” in the instant of the subject of sensibility (TeI 117/TI 144). It is this ecstatic exaltation of myself (TeI 130/TI 156), the founding of myself, that makes

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<sup>39</sup> Edith Wyschogrod rightly underlines the fact that the joy I experience in consumption is an excess not implied by the idea of simply persisting in being, i.e., nourishment as a tool or means for *surviving*. See *The problem of ethical metaphysics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 59-60. Nourishment does not mean simply “refueling” that lets me continue to be, without any further qualification; it is vitality over and above life considered as the act of mere survival.

<sup>40</sup> For an analysis of what participation means, see Levinas's 1957 essay, “Lévy-Bruhl et l'ontologie contemporaine” in *EN*, pp. 59-64. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas scarcely speaks of participation, and then only to oppose it to interiority. He does not define it, but despite the resonances with Platonic philosophy, in light of the fact that Lévy-Bruhl's name reappears in *Totality and Infinity* as the thinker who had done the most to establish the notion of participation, it seems far more likely that Levinas assimilates participation in older traditions (and in new traditions rooted in those older traditions) to Lévy-Bruhl's conception of it, rather than the reverse.

enjoyment, despite its fusional and immersive structure, the very articulation of separation from elemental being rather than situating it as *conditioned* by separation (TeI 8/TI 38). Interiority, my mode of being separate from the elemental others in the midst of which I stand and from which I never leave,<sup>41</sup> is enjoyment.

### Enjoyment Is Life

Enjoyment is the situation that enables self-identification in every relationship with sensible beings. Nevertheless, the analysis of enjoyment, while revealing, is potentially misleading, whether one considers subjectivity or being. For “enjoyment” tends to connote a specific affective intentionality; yet Levinas's analysis of interiority, as we saw from the initial discussion of the unique mode of identification of the self, has to be consonant with an account of the self's capacity to identify itself in *every* relationship with worldly beings. If we say that enjoyment is merely one affect among others, then we might be led to think that Levinas owes us an account of how affect in general enables such self-identification, for surely enjoyment, as a specific affect, cannot account for the whole range of worldly relationships I sustain.

Yet Levinas does not give such an account. He insists instead on enjoyment precisely as extending over the whole of our interior being in worldly relations. This behavior merits the question: what does this term, “enjoyment,” really mean? And what

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<sup>41</sup> “Metaphysical desire does not aspire to return, for it is a desire for a country where we were not born. For a country foreign to every nature, which was not our homeland and where *we never will transport ourselves*” (TeI 3/TI 33-34, my emphasis). See also: “Alterity, the radical heterogeneity of the Other [*Autre*] is only possible if the Other [*Autre*] is other [*autre*] in relation to a term whose essence is to remain at the point of departure, to serve as an *entry* into the relation, to be the Same not relatively, but absolutely” (TeI 6/TI 36). These quotations imply that I *never* am not the Same; I never become Other.

are its implications for our understanding of being, and for my becoming a subject of being?

When Levinas begins his description of the original movement of enjoyment, which is the beginning of his analysis of interiority, he writes:

We live on 'good soup,' on air, on light, on spectacles, on work, on ideas, on sleep, etc. ... These are not in this case objects of representations. We live on them. That on which we live is not any longer a 'means for life' [*moyen de vie*], like a pen is a means of relating to the letter that it allows one to write; nor a goal of life, like communication is the goal of the letter. Things on which we live are not tools nor even utensils in the Heideggerian sense of the term. [...] In a certain measure, they are always—even hammers, needles, and machines—objects of enjoyment [...] (TeI 82/TI 110).

Immediately, the equivalence of “life” and “living” with “enjoyment” springs to the fore, placing this analysis as a challenge to the claim that *ontology*—i.e., either comprehension of beings in their being, or participation as finding no orientation other than toward anonymous existential alterity (which would assimilate subjectivity to it)—*is life, is the very act of living*.<sup>42</sup> Not ontology, but *enjoyment*, is the living of life.

Enjoyment is not, then, simply a specific feeling, but “the joy *or the pain* of breathing, looking, eating, working, manipulating the hammer and the machine, etc.” (TeI 82/TI 110, my emphasis). Encompassing both joy *and* pain, and all their myriad variations, enjoyment is both a positive feeling (joy, satisfaction, and the like function as synonyms) *and* the mode of my sensible feeling *in general*, which can sustain variations,

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<sup>42</sup> To the degree that one can call living an act, if by “act” one means that which a self-identifying subject enacts from out of its own resources. As Levinas argues: “Need cannot [...] be characterized either as liberty, since it is dependency, nor as passivity, since it lives from that which, already familiar and without secret, does not render it servile, but makes it rejoice” (TeI 119/TI 145). Enjoyment, articulated as needy relations with others, is neither an act nor pure passivity.



and even its contraries, but *always as variations on an initially positive affect*.<sup>43</sup> This primacy of the positive (limited) affect at the heart of the generalization of this affect to cover living itself is encompassed elsewhere in the term “*agrément*”:

Between the self [*moi*] and *that on which it lives* the absolute distance that separates the Same and the personal Other [*Autrui*] does not extend. The acceptance or refusal of that on which we lives supposes a *prior agreement* [*agrément préalable*]*—at once given and received, the agreement of happiness. The first agreement—to live—does not alienate the self, but maintains it, constitutes its being at home [chez soi] (TeI 116-117/TI 143).*

“*Agrément*” means both to agree to, but also agreeableness, i.e., pleasantness or enjoyability. Both meanings are operative: to be aroused by worldly beings to enjoyment is to be constituted as a living body. That I move, that I respond, although not an agreement that I approached after consideration, is an affirmation that I am, and whether I recoil or rejoice, these responses accomplish and sustain my life. Hence “agreement” is an initial “yes” to living that occurs precisely *as* living; this is why my agreement is not an alienation, but is my very sojourning in the world, or being at home in the field of worldly elements.

Within the life lived upon that that initial “yes” has opened, affect can be pleasant or painful. And while painfulness nevertheless constitutes me, if in a crippled mode that affirms my personality in its very depression of it,<sup>44</sup> it is in enjoyment as satisfying, as

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<sup>43</sup> Elsewhere, Levinas writes: “enjoyment—happiness or unhappiness [...]” (TeI 90/TI 117), making clear in rare moments that enjoyment encompasses more than *joie de vivre* or *bonheur*. While this formulation is more rare than the identification of enjoyment with *bonheur* and exaltation, it cannot be discounted at risk of misunderstanding the situation of subjectivity when analyzed as animated, corporeal sensibility.

<sup>44</sup> For feeling is never without its reflux: living is not merely enjoyable but I love living [TeI 118/TI 145]; pain is not merely painful, but I hate it and despair over it (TeI 119/TI 146).

exaltation that the self “crystalizes” (TeI 118/TI 44) or has its individuated personality (TeI 88, 121/TI 115, 147). For this reason, enjoyment as positive affection, which we may call a specific affect, is inseparable in the end from my personality, and this inseparability serves quietly as a justification for rendering enjoyment as equivalent for living my life.<sup>45</sup>

Given the above analysis of the interplay of enjoyment (specific feeling) with living my life (general and universal condition of subjectivity), that the “objects of enjoyment” encompass all beings cannot surprise us. Some of these objects are objects proper; others are not: some of them qualify as bounded, definite things existing 'over there' or 'over here'—machines, hammers, ob-jects in the sense of things localized in the environment somewhere and external to me.<sup>46</sup> Other “objects,” like looking, working, manipulation, consciousness itself, are not objects, but modes of my being.<sup>47</sup> For a being to be an “object of enjoyment” it suffices that its qualitative or elemental character emerge. No thing lacks this character, for, (phenomeno)logically, the substantiality of an object is a modification of the being's elemental mode of being, a modification that occurs only at the level of labor and dwelling, not the original mode of being of

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<sup>45</sup> See also Elaine Scarry's phenomenology of pain and personality in the introduction and first chapter of *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1985), 3-19, 27-59.

<sup>46</sup> This modifies our sense of what an element is: it is not a simply formless being, but the form in a sense does not count as a form; it is not as a lit-up knowable and definite reality that we are concerned with the form of a being, but with whether it pleases, satisfies. Hence, as Levinas writes, enjoyment makes the elemental aspect break forth from beings (TeI 107/TI 134).

<sup>47</sup> For this reason, Levinas's claim, that I enjoy others, but never myself, cannot be accepted (TeI 116/TI 143). His aim is to show the dependence and insufficiency of the self to itself, but to the degree that consciousness and labor as intentional modes of relationship with other beings are susceptible to being enjoyed, I enjoy myself. Granted, I do not enjoy *only* myself, I enjoy how I am in relation with the other being; however, I do not *fail* to enjoy how I feel in a reflux that passes beneath the reflective structure of consciousness.

impersonal existents (TeI 135/TI 161).

And yet even at the level of labor and dwelling, enjoyment returns, and it does not negate the activities of labor or dwelling, but takes pleasure in them. If enjoyment were not the living of life, but only one process of life, then it might have a discrete range of “objects”; however, since enjoyment of elements *is* living on, i.e., is living my life, nothing and no activity is in principle excluded as nourishment for my life.<sup>48</sup>

Therefore, it bears stressing, by way of showing that the elemental character of the “object” of enjoyment has consequences for the overall interpretation of enjoyment of life, that the “elemental” as pure quality signifies that

things are always more than the strictly necessary, they are the grace of life. We live from our work that assures our subsistence, but we also live from our work because it fills (gladdens [*réjouit*] or saddens) life. It is in this second sense of “living on one's labor” that, if things are in place, the first returns. The object seen occupies life as object, but the vision of the object is the “joy” of life (TeI 84/TI 111-112).

My life is composed of gladness and sadness in relation to elemental being, which exceeds the notion of “being” as a pure persistence in *merely* being-identical, i.e., as *necessity* for maintaining or perduring as myself, as bare and unadorned presence. Thanks to the equivalence of life and enjoyment, Levinas makes impossible the simple equation of my life and my living of my life with my mere survival or merely surviving, i.e., with

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<sup>48</sup> Whether Levinas is faithful to the furthest implications of this equation of life and enjoyment is debatable. He certainly recognizes that I can make the personal other, the transcendent *Vous*, into an opportunity for enjoyment or disgust, assimilating the other to an element. This is the paradigmatic unethical relationship. However, if enjoyment is indeed life, and even dying and death do not fall outside of my living my life, then surely the ethical relationship to which the personal other arouses me also does not fall simply outside of my living my life, and would be inevitably shot through with enjoyment, which could not signify only as unethical or as a kind of (quasi-)category error in my response to the personal other.

simple perduration in being.

But he also makes impossible the move to grasp being as a bare “something *is*” or even “something *is necessary only for perduration*.” Analyzed in relation to sensibility, no being is only an existent or a pure tool: things are always more than “what is necessary” for survival alone, or for any limited task. Elemental being relates to me as exalting or depressing my life, and this holds for all beings whose being is elemental. The elemental is the fundamental mode of being that any existent can assume in relation with me, and in which that existent's sense is not exhausted by the notion of the necessary. And as noted already, the inclusivity of the list of “objects of enjoyment,” ranging from states of being (sleep, seeing) to activity (work of all sorts), to palpable “entities,” as it were, such as light and air and any sort of spectacle down to objects like hammers and machinery, or even non-objective entities like ideas, is appropriate, for none of these could be considered apart from the living—joyful at times, sorrowful or painful at others—of one's life.

To enjoy elements, then, is simply *to live among other beings as exalted or saddened by them*, not to live among them as another being that is merely side-by-side with them or as relating to beings that signify first of all *necessity for...* . In their elemental character, the “objects of enjoyment” are not a means to living, like an object can be a means to some *definite task*—like the pen that is a means to writing the letter: *life* is not a definite, i.e., limited, task—it is the 'task' without an end that could be accomplished through deployment of proper means, but which we also cannot refuse,

even should we choose to commit suicide.<sup>49</sup> For life is not isolated from any particular state or intentionality of a living subject, including dying; enjoyment, if it is indeed the intentional stance by which we name the passionate<sup>50</sup> movement of living our lives, is then not one feeling among others (TeI 85/TI 113), nor merely one stance among others, but that which remains throughout, sustaining and contributing to the meaning of every modification of our relationships with other beings and with ourselves.

Now, Levinas claims that enjoyment is not “the grasp of consciousness [*la prise de conscience*] on that which fills life” (TeI 83/TI 111). But that “[t]he intentionality of enjoyment can be described by opposition to the intentionality of representation” (TeI 100/TI 127), because enjoyment is not a thought, nor even a greatly weakened and attenuated extension of thinking (TeI 112/TI 139)—this does not mean that on the one hand, there is enjoyment, on the other hand, there is consciousness, in two mutually exclusive intentionalities that I experience intermittently, alternating between the two. He means rather that consciousness is a distinct mode of living—what else could consciousness be but alive and living?—whose structure in relation to beings is other

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<sup>49</sup> “In its opposition to being, the self [*moi*] demands refuge from being itself. Suicide is tragic, for death does not bring a solution to all the problems that birth cause to arise, is powerless to humiliate the values of the earth. [...] Suffering, at one and the same time despairs of being riveted to being, and loves the being to which it is riveted. Impossibility to leave life” (TeI 119/TI 145-146). Here, “being” must not be understood as essence rather than existence, but as existence that is precisely composed of “values of the earth,” i.e., enjoyment—living itself. The “impossibility of leaving life” spoken of here is not the impossibility of killing oneself or of dying—that is all too possible—but the impossibility of taking a stance toward life that would be *other* than a living of life. Once one is dead, there is no stance, only anonymous existing, which is not a position or stance at all (DEE 16, 118/EE 2, 66).

<sup>50</sup> This term should be heard in all its resonances: suffering, passivity, and also stimulation, feeling, responsivity that can be pure reflex, but also highly complex (re)action and engagement that we claim as our own product, dependent upon ourselves and our powers.

than enjoyment straightforwardly, but consciousness in relation to being is not able to be separated from enjoyment.<sup>51</sup> Knowing and representation are *always* motivated—however careful consciousness is in representing and knowing its *intentum* to be disinterested<sup>52</sup> with respect to it, its relationships with its object or noema are not immediately truth-seeking, if by truth-seeking one means a disinterested, un-self-regarding engagement with the being. One *loves* truth before one knows it:<sup>53</sup> one *philosophizes* before one cognizes or understands.<sup>54</sup>

Enjoyment itself can only appear as opposite to theoretical, representational consciousness insofar as consciousness is “detached [...] from concrete conditions” (TeI 99/TI 126). Concretely, understanding and theoretical consciousness are embedded within enjoyment—they are an intensification of my interiority within the elemental field, which, if they have their own particular structure, ultimately themselves feed life. Thus understanding and consciousness both depend upon enjoyment to arise, *and* their

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<sup>51</sup> “That on which we live and enjoy is not merged with this life itself. I eat bread, listen to music, follow the course of my ideas. If I live my life, the life that I live and the fact of living remain however distinct” (TeI 94/TI 122).

<sup>52</sup> I do not use this term in Levinas's technical sense, where it means positively being-for-the-other, i.e., the structure of goodness as sociality between the other and myself. I use it rather in the ordinary sense where disinterest means simply having no stake or self-promoting motive with respect to an object or a state of affairs.

<sup>53</sup> *Symposium*, 199a—200c, 201e—202b, 204a-c, 210a—212b. One must of course allow for the fact that the love of wisdom for Plato's Socrates implies the love of that which is already in the neighborhood of the good, rather than being, as in this instance, a motivation by enjoyment, also beyond truth and cognition. On the Socratic philosopher's relationship with wisdom, see also: Marina McCoy, *Plato on the Rhetoric of Philosophers and Sophists* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 19, 120-137, esp. pp. 132-133.

<sup>54</sup> And in fact, one *philosophizes* or one *will never understand*.

relationships with objects are themselves enjoyable,<sup>55</sup> for “[t]he final relationship is enjoyment, *happiness* [*bonheur*]” (TeI 85/TI 113).<sup>56</sup> Consciousness and understanding, in other words, just in their specific mode of relating to beings, are a *content* of life (TeI 94/TI 122), an aliment or feeding of my sensible existence.<sup>57</sup>

If we understand all of these points, then when Levinas writes that “enjoyment, in relation to the food which is the *other* of life, is an independence *sui generis*, the independence of happiness” (TeI 87/TI 115), we will not then be misled into thinking that this is some causal claim about the capacity of the subject of life to generate its life out of nothing or out of itself, and which must be treated under physics or some other special science. Instead, we will recognize in this claim the answer to our question: “how is the self self-identifying?” To be self-identifying, rather than identified via the system of identities, is to be an origin of identification, to stand as the “principle of individuation” beyond any system (TeI 121/TI 147), to which any system must refer (TeI 5-6/TI 35-36). Thanks to the analysis of enjoyment, we now understand that to be self-identifying is to be “*sui generis*” inasmuch as alive, inasmuch as living on... is the absolutely original

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<sup>55</sup> See TeI 94/TI 122, 101-102/128-129, 111-112/137-138, 114/140-141.

<sup>56</sup> The same is true of practical life, or the life of activity and projects: “[b]ehind theory and practice, there is enjoyment of theory and practice: the egoism of life” (TeI 85/TI 113). This does not mean that there is some strange, noumenal enjoyment, as it were, ‘behind’ theory and practice, but that theory and practice, as interactions with objects aimed at truth or use, are themselves, in their very truthfulness and usefulness, the unfolding of the life of the self which gives the self content, i.e., a life that is determinate and distinctly itself—an ego, a self that is not alienated from itself in its movement, even if it is continually altered by it and by the others to which it incessantly relates.

<sup>57</sup> One might infer from this that consciousness’s orientation toward truth is originally a desire to *enjoy* truth, and that there is no desire for truth that goes beyond enjoyment until the truth-orientation of consciousness is reduced to the metaphysical relationship with the other person.

relationship, the basis of any approach to any question or being, and that enjoyment as living on... is never to be approached from any other position. The independence of life as it is lived, its self-identification, comes from the fact that it is impossible to identify a position from which one could *approach* life *externally from life as we are already living it*.<sup>58</sup>

Living is the absolutely original movement of subjectivity. The subject who lives does not precede his or her living, does not approach life from some other-than-living stance, does not “fall into a body” from some other realm of super- or otherworldly existence (Levinas's critique of Plato's philosophy of the soul and body relationship [TeI 140/TI 165]). Enjoyment—living life—does not happen to a self already existing independently in its identity by some mode of being other than living life: life *happens as some concretely sensitive personality*; it does not happen *to someone already identifiable but outside of the realm of life*. There is no “other” of life whose position subjectivity could occupy as living.

The only other of life appropriate to the *living* of life is that from which or on which one lives, as we have seen already. Nourishment and food, however, are neither outside of life, nor, again, can be conceived as tools related to a limited end: they are not fuels that one uses in order to accomplish a definite end (TeI 83/TI 111). If one must think in such terms as means-end, they are used for an indefinite end—living. Even so,

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<sup>58</sup> That this is so positions Levinas well vis-à-vis Heidegger and Husserl, each of whom were also seeking the proper situation from which to philosophize, if philosophy was not to be divorced from life and also avoid being merely a discipline with a special range of objects. See Bowler, *Heidegger and Aristotle*, 1-7.



the instrumentality implied by the idea of a “means” obscures the crucial point: the other on which I live, which living is *more than persistence or perduration or even beginning*,<sup>59</sup> arouses me, so that I “follow” it, or am dependent upon it. An instrument is not merely useful, it is provocative, and its provocation is not *only* due to the referential world it opens to understanding, but to its feel, to the way it thrills and offers itself and all its potentials to my enjoyment.

A living body, which must be analyzed as a sensitive, motivated sensibility, contains therefore an irreducible reference to the elemental plenum—worldly being—that motivates it. Such a body only has sense or makes sense insofar as it responds to another. If consciousness—immobile in its representational activity, to use the terminology of “Intentionality and metaphysics”—cannot come first, as the original mode of subjectivity, it is also the case that a body conceived as absolutely isolated and so unmoved would never be occasion for consciousness to arise, for it could not be sensibility either. Moreover, relationships with emptiness, nothing, etc., depend on my being already aroused by alterity;<sup>60</sup> while relations of what one might call a pure anesthesia are the products of consciousness in its capacity to represent itself as coming first: they are illusory, and yet this illusoriness is itself a testimony to the peculiar character of the self's

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<sup>59</sup> Living is an appetite for more than persistence in being as a reiteration of my presence without embellishment: one wants “triumph” (TeI 85/TI 113), “joy” (TeI 84/TI 112), a storied life (TeI 119/TI 146)—all that makes life *worthwhile* as opposed to simply treatable under the heading of “perdurance” without reference to the neediness that conditions joy, triumph, and a dramatic life (TeI 84/TI 112).

<sup>60</sup> Minimally, the alterity of the elements, although Levinas indicates in various places that one must also have the idea of the infinite (TeI 90, 110, 112/TI 117, 137, 139). On the implications of this latter point, see below.

power, which can retroactively posit itself as its own condition.<sup>61</sup>

### **Implications of Living On... As the Mode of My Self-identification**

From our extended analysis of the bodily I and its self-identification, by which subjectivity is always the same, we conclude that in contrast with the fatal ontology developed in the 1940s, in *Totality and Infinity* the I or subject is not (onto)logically hypostasis. Hypostasis, as described in Levinas's early work, was the event of individuation, of ontological differentiation and a reconfiguration of the priority of being and individual being: hypostasis signified an end to the reign of uninterrupted *il y a*tic presence. Yet this “end” was not accomplished once and for all: hypostasis was a function (TA 32 /TO 52). It localized limitless, eternal being in a being, which could rupture the timelessness of eternity only in an equally timeless instant: for on Levinas's analysis, an instant was an instant *only* inasmuch as it had no past nor any future. Hypostasis accomplished only individual subjectivity, in a *fruitless* mastery of being. It accomplished only the individual as effecting ontological difference. As we saw in chapter two of the present work, the world and interpersonal relationships already accomplished more than hypostasis.

What holds for the ontologically interpreted world of the 1940s holds even more for the self-identification of subjectivity in *Totality and Infinity*. As enjoyment *first of all*

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<sup>61</sup> See TeI 25/TI 54 concerning the anteriority of the posterior, as well as the analysis of the relationship between the house as condition of representing consciousness: “[T]he home cannot be forgotten among the conditions of representation, even if representation is a privileged condition, engulfing its condition. For it only engulfs it after the fact, a posteriori” (TeI 126-127/TI 153). See also Fabio Ciarraelli's essay on the anteriority of the posterior: “The Anteriority of the Posterior” in *Graduate Faculty Journal* 20/21, no. 1/2 (1998): 409-425.

*and always*, sensible subjectivity is always already worldly, and comes to be a subject of being not ontologically—in the relationship of a being to its being in a fruitless, hypostatic instant, ever reiterated—but “axiologically”—in a joyful evaluation of beings:

The arousal [*surgissement*] of a self based on enjoyment and where the substantiality of the self is apperceived not as a subject of the verb to be, but as implicated in happiness—arising not from ontology, but from axiology—is the exaltation of the *being [étant] tout court*. The being [*étant*] would not then be justiciable by the “comprehension of being” or by ontology. One becomes a subject of being, not in assuming being [*l'être*], but in enjoying happiness, by the interiorization of enjoyment that is also an exaltation, an “above being.” The being [*étant*] is “autonomous” in relation to being [*être*]. It does not indicate a participation in being, but happiness. The being [*l'étant*] *par excellence* is man (TeI 91-92/TI 119).

Being is enjoyment—living life—to the self-identifying, sensible subjectivity: in enjoyment, the subject of being is not the apperceived subject of the verb “to be,” nor is it evaluated or analyzable ontologically, insofar as ontology seeks first of all to elicit the comprehension of being implicit in relationships of ontological difference between being and individual existents. The subject of being becomes a subject of being, and being gains a meaning, through living life. Living life, however, is always more than a logical or ontological event that delineates necessary conditions for truth or existence; it is an excess of feeling over and above necessity, as well as over any notion of a pale, “colorless” existence (EN 63/ENe 48), “innocently possessed by the existent” independently of the lived situation of subjectivity (EN 63, 66/ENe 48, 50). Axiology, the affective, responsive e-evaluation of that which arouses me, renders me a subject of being just insofar as it marks the moment in which I am, as living, beyond “pure existing” (TeI 85/TI 113). I am beyond pure existing as colorless being or anonymous being, as I am

also beyond the fatal ontology, which constituted nothing but being as pure ontological difference. Thus as subject of being, I am always a being who enjoys because positioned in the elemental being that I depend upon in living my life; correlatively, elemental being is always related to and manifested sensibly in my fleshly life.

The analysis of enjoyment, as we have seen, clearly appropriates certain Husserlian insights: Levinas finds Husserl's work most productive and insightful in placing the corporeal, sensitive and motivated body at the center of phenomenological research. Granted, Levinas had always been sensitive to the role of sentiment, emotion, affect, feeling, and sensation in his work, in reevaluating Husserl. But in *Totality and Infinity*, he has located the starting point of his own work in the difference between, not being and a being, necessarily, but between sensibility-as-motivated-movement and that which motivates, which latter he calls "alterity" rather than being. Elements are the other of my life (TeI 87/TI 115), on which I depend; the personal other is absolutely other than me and my living (TeI 168/TI 194), yet as we have seen above, it also conditions my living life.

Both alterities condition my living; what differentiates them is their motivational content, as it were: the alterity of elements remains in a sense within the movement of my life inasmuch as they motivate my individual sensibility to enjoy, and so facilitate my individual self-identification. The personal other, whose alterity is absolute and does not offer itself to sensibility *only* to be enjoyed or suffered, motivates me to act beyond the conditions that would further my living my life. The difference between my enjoyment

and that which motivates me, whether an element or the personal other, is the fruitful horizon of Levinas's analysis of sensibility that positions subjectivity always and originally beyond the hypostatic individuation of the 1940s and the fatal ontology. Subjectivity always accomplishes more than ontological difference: it opens in joy to an other that moves it, risks suffering, does suffer, and temporalizes as a recurring, but exalting, individuating present.<sup>62</sup> Moreover, its opening in joy exposes it to the outbreak of futurity of the elemental other, and to the different futurity of the other [*autrui*], as we shall see.<sup>63</sup>

If ontological inquiry is dedicated to showing the intelligibility of being, and constitutes intelligibility in view of ontological difference, then given all that we have seen of Levinas's work above, ontological inquiry fails to reveal significations articulated by the difference between myself and alterities of different sorts—most especially the alterity of the other [*autrui*], although Levinas comes to this conclusion well before he offers a phenomenology of the face. Ontology therefore fails to be sensitive to the significance of enjoyment, which does not bring out the intelligibility of being,<sup>64</sup> but reveals instead the situation and movement of subjectivity *as always a response to an other it depends upon in some fashion*. It also, as we will see and as is well-known, fails,

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<sup>62</sup> “The original positivity of enjoyment, perfectly innocent, is opposed to nothing and, in this sense, is immediately sufficient. Instant or pause, success of the *carpe diem*, sovereignty of the ‘after us the deluge’” (TeI 119/TI 145).

<sup>63</sup> See below, pp. 183-186, 198-200.

<sup>64</sup> Even if it does give being a meaning, namely the enjoyment that is living. Levinas, one infers, restricts intelligibility to theoretical consciousness considered without reference to sensibility properly analyzed on its own terms.

on Levinas's reading, to be sensitive to the significance of the other [*autrui*] (ethical signification).

We can also trace the difference between being in *Totality and Infinity* and Levinas's earlier ontology through a comparison of how need functions and signifies in them. In *Totality and Infinity*, need is considered almost exclusively within the framework of enjoyment (i.e., exultation and joy, original agreement). If I am a dependent being, dependent upon elemental being in which I am immersed as a body, this dependency is manifest in my needing the other (TeI 118-120/TI 144-146). Yet my neediness does not first of all or at all signify my deliverance without remission to the impersonality of being. It structures me as dependent, yet the enjoyment that opens and structures my relationship with that on which I, as need, am dependent exalts me, so that I experience, in the fulfillment of need—in the transmutation of the element into me—an independence from the very being that I need (TeI 117/TI 144). This is why “need is loved, man is happy to have needs”: “A being without needs would not be more happy than a needy being, but outside of happiness and unhappiness” (TeI 120/TI 146). Need is, therefore, essential to enjoyment: it is “the first movement of the Same” (TeI 88/TI 116). Being is needy, therefore, but being also is not that to which I am irremissibly delivered; need does not make visible ontological difference, as it had once.

Even when need outstrips positive enjoyment, when the future disappearance of the enjoyable element makes itself felt as a time that is not mine, and which signifies its not belonging to me by its apparent indifference to my needs, it does not signify the

undoing of the world. True, need, when it ceases to facilitate enjoyment (positive affect), makes aliments appear as survival-means: need then makes me, in my bodily being, a burden to myself in my dependency on elemental alterity, to the point of saying that I am “body-slave” by virtue of being bodily (TeI 138/TI 164). Nevertheless, Levinas claims, need does not *simply* subject me to being, like a hammer-stroke immediately subjects a nail to force and determines its position and shape, for “[t]hat which is necessary to my existence in order to subsist, interests my existence. I pass from this dependence to this joyous independence—and, in my very suffering, I have my existence from the interior” (TeI 138-139/TI 164). For suffering, too, as we saw above, is a mode of enjoyment by which I am the living of my life, a continual and unfailing accomplishment of self-identification. And since enjoyment is existence within elemental being, and yet also as exalted above it, the suffering of need, being nothing more than a mode of enjoyment, does not place me in relation to any unworldly referents: I am always still within worldly, elemental being, always self-identifying in my relationship with worldly beings.

Suffering need even becomes the spur to the development of my powers, and so the multiplication of my opportunities for positive enjoyment, for me to feel viscerally the “yes!” to living my life. For to need is already not simply to depend upon the elemental other, but to have time in relation to its time, which is a future in which it will not be present for my enjoyment. Of itself,<sup>65</sup> the *chanciness* of happiness and satisfaction that characterizes neediness spurs a modification of my relationship with elemental

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<sup>65</sup> This means that the threat of *il y a* experienced in suffering does not include, to be effective, a reference to the personal other.

being: confronted with the future that constitutes the independence of the elemental as an indifference to me, I begin to labor. In being spurred to labor by the *il y a*tic future of the element (TeI 115, 124/TI 141, 150), however, I am not simply sensing and enjoying, I live as a will. A will

marks the point where the definitive of an event occurs as non-definitive. The force of the will does not unfold like a force stronger than the obstacle. It consists in approaching the obstacle not in butting up against it, but always giving oneself a distance with respect to it, in apperceiving an interval between oneself and the imminence of the obstacle. To will is to prevent danger. To conceive the future is to pre-vent [*pré-venir*] (TeI 140/TI 166).

I follow after the element in an initial “yes,” and yet in having recourse to labor, I temporalize as a living self in such a way as to “come before” [*pré-venir*] and so *prevent* the moment of the elemental's absolute indifference to me. To be sensibility is to live, which is to enjoy, and so to be such as can sustain *threats*, rather than to be immediately and definitively undone by the other's independence;<sup>66</sup> to live is to have the capacity to maintain temporal distance in the midst of a volatile field of existents. In this way, I am freed up from simple subjection to the forces of my environment (which would be *total* and irremissible dependency on being, like an animal [TeI 89/TI 116]), and I “arrive at overcoming the very misery of this liberation” (TeI 89/TI 117).

Thus although the element is indifferent to my need, in the sense of being neither for nor against me when I agree to it (TeI 138/TI 164), this indifference—which Levinas

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<sup>66</sup> One senses in this analysis a veiled critique of Nietzsche's analysis of the phenomenon of willing, in which he criticized the notion that there were free and unfree wills by arguing that such notions disguised the relevant reality: namely, that willing, as force, like all forces, discharged immediately all of its power, and that there were only strong and weak wills, i.e., wills with force enough immediately to overcome an obstacle and wills that lack sufficient force. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), §§21-22.



claims derives from my relation, at a certain moment in the heart of need, to an *il y atic* depth without origin (TeI 115/TI 141)—does not “indicate the non-liberty of need” (TeI 115/TI 141). Fundamentally, in relation to the element as an endless, sourceless, impersonal field of qualitative being that eventually is lost in an *il y atic* night,<sup>67</sup> there is (I repeat) no irremissible submission of me to being. I do not become the subject of being as subjected irremissibly to it.

I take Levinas to be saying, therefore, that my self-identification, and consequently my worldly relation with being, is never truly brought into question, even when suffering makes me a “slave” to my bodily being, or better, makes my bodily being an enslavement because of its dependency on elemental alterity: “[t]he pessimism of abandonment [*déréliction*] is [...] not irremediable—man holds within his hands the remedy of his ills [*ses maux*] and the remedies preexist the ills” (TeI 120/TI 146). Ontological difference does not weigh or signify as it had once in such phenomena as need and suffering from existence; it may not even “appear” to me in them, for even in my “enslavement,” I am not simply subjected to being with no means against my enslavement, but relate to the element as an other who may still feed my life.

In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas does not attempt to make a reduction of the world by situating it against a horizon of unworldly references to pure, anonymous being, but there *is* an implicit reference that the world makes to *an* unworldly referent, and which has not yet been discussed, although it is critical for the whole body of Levinas's work.

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<sup>67</sup> That is, in an indetermination whose sensible manifestation is my own felt insecurity.

As one might expect, this unworldly referent is the other [*autrui*].

From time to time, Levinas interrupts his attempt to describe the originality of life as the intentional relationship of sensibility to the elemental world to remind his readers that, in fact, interiority, despite *appearing* to be a consecutive series of modifications of enjoyment that begin by altering the bathing relationship,<sup>68</sup> is not actually able to be so described.<sup>69</sup> The bathing relationship appears to be elementary and concrete, but in fact “[t]he description of enjoyment, such as it has been led up to this point, does not, obviously, translate concrete humanity. In reality, the human being already has the idea of the infinite, i.e., lives in society and represents things to himself or herself [*se représente les choses*]” (TeI 112-113/TI 139). Or again: “The passage from instantaneous enjoyment to the fabrication of things refers to habitation, to economy, which supposes the welcome of the other person [*autrui*]” (TeI 120/TI 146).

Precisely at what point does the other welcome me?<sup>70</sup> The second quotation

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<sup>68</sup> These modifications include dwelling and labor, and ultimately result in subjectivity as consciousness.

<sup>69</sup> At TeI 110/TI 137, 112-113/139, 120/146, 122-123/148-149.

<sup>70</sup> A note concerning the interpretation of the phrase “the welcome of the other.” It is true that one usually interprets “the welcome of the other person” as *my* welcome of the other; grammatically however, in the present context, there is nothing to indicate *whose* welcome is at issue: mine of the other, or the other of me. However, contextually, the phrase arises here in speaking of the passage from enjoyment to dwelling. But in dwelling, there *is* no other who confronts me as a face teaching me that I must welcome as the other. On the contrary, the other *welcomes me*, “discreetly,” as Levinas puts it, so that I do not realize the implications of the warmth of the home’s atmosphere: my “retirement is referred to a welcome” [*recueillement se réfère à un accueil*]” which *is* the intimacy of another who makes a home a home (TeI 128/TI 155). Or again, and more strongly, by way of conclusion, Levinas writes: “It is necessary that I have been in relation with something on which I do not live. That event is the relation with the Other [*avec Autrui*] who welcomes me in the House” (TeI 145/TI 170-171). As difficult as Levinas’s work in relation to the feminine other of the home is to digest when we take into account the sexist relationships that still structure the majority of our relationships with each other, no reasonable interpretation of it could fail to acknowledge that the other welcomes me into the home by making a physical structure homey. Later and even earlier uses of the phrase “the welcome of the other” do refer to my welcome of the other, but I see no

suggests that it is in the transition from the immediacy of enjoyment to labor and habitation; yet the first quotation gives us pause. If the idea of the infinite, which is to say a relationship with another person, prevents Levinas from accepting enjoyment even in its initial upsurge as concrete human living, then can it really be that the other's welcome is only supposed in the transition from pure bathing to labor and habitation? Or rather, to put it in another way, can the transition from the former to the latter be a *modification of enjoyment lived as bathing* rather than a retreat into a more fundamental structure than the self-identification of the sensitive self bathing in the alterity of elemental being?

In fact, in the midst of the description of dwelling, Levinas is forced to have recourse to an interpersonal relationship even to *describe* the home on which hinges his analyses of labor and the rise of conscious intentionality (TeI 126-127, 130/TI 154, 157). The home, Levinas argues, is neither an end nor a tool, and yet it is a privileged articulation of interiority:

[t]he privilege of the home [...] consists [...] in being the condition and, in this sense, the beginning of human activity. The retirement [*recueillement*] necessary in order that it be possible for nature to be represented and worked, in order that it take shape [*se dessine*] only as world, is accomplished as home (TeI 125/TI 151).

The world and human activity *begin* with my relation to the home, which is a building or structure. Yet, writes Levinas, “[t]he building only takes this signification [i.e., as home] based on this retirement” (TeI 127/TI 154).<sup>71</sup> That is, on his account, it is incorrect to

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reason, either grammatical or contextual, to interpret it so in this instance, when the reference clearly looks ahead to the welcome of me into the home by the other.

<sup>71</sup> *Recueillement* is often translated as “recollection,” a translation that seems to me entirely opaque on the one hand, and misleadingly Platonic on the other hand. Levinas claims that “man stands in the world as

conceive of the house as immediately a shelter insofar as it is a structure: to do so is already to come too late to the analysis of the home's unique constitution (TeI 125/TI 152). For a building or structure as such, even if it be *isolation*<sup>72</sup> from the elements, is not a shelter, i.e., is not *homey*, in itself (and so incapable of effecting a conscious, laboring subject), but only because I retire into it. What constitutes the movement of retirement? It is not the retreat into the house as a physical structure that accomplishes retirement from the elements, but rather my retreat into the structure is retirement because the structure is constituted by a particular atmosphere, namely warmth, familiarity, and intimacy (TeI 124, 127/TI 150, 153-154). My retirement has then a direct relationship to this atmosphere.

The key question, then, is what provokes or enables retirement, which is equivalent to asking after the origin of this atmosphere. In what becomes a notorious moment in the history of the interpretation of feminine gender in philosophy, Levinas writes:

The familiarity of the world does not result only from habits taken in the world, that relieve it of its abrasiveness [*rugosités*] and which measure the adaptation of the living being to a world which it enjoys and on which it is nourished. Familiarity and intimacy occur as a gentleness spreading over the face of things [...] coming from [*provenant*] a friendship with regard to this ego [*moi*]. The

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having come toward it from a private domain, from a being at home, where he can, at every moment *retire*" (TeI 125/TI 152, my emphasis). Retirement, retreat into a situation in which I have time for myself, is what is meant by this term.

<sup>72</sup> To be sure, isolation does not mean to be totally cut off from relationship with elements. Nevertheless, Levinas does seem to accept the terminology of "isolation," even as he tries to render precise the nature of separation: "it is necessary that this closure not prohibit going out of interiority, in order that exteriority may speak to [the separated being], reveal himself to him, in a movement unforeseeable that the isolation of the separated being cannot, by simple contrast, arouse" (TeI 122/TI 148).

intimacy that familiarity already supposes is an *intimacy with someone*. [...] And the Other [*Autre*] whose presence is discretely an absence, based on which the hospitable welcome par excellence is accomplished, which describes the field of intimacy, is the Woman (TeI 128/TI 154-155).

In other words, the elemental as a field of sensible enjoyment—the familiar world—is not given originally from itself: enjoyment depends upon the other, whom “Woman” here figures. That the elemental is not constituted purely as impersonal being should perhaps not surprise us. Elemental being is one of the more careful descriptions of “impersonal” being that Levinas gives in *Totality and Infinity*, yet its worldly character, irreducible to the fatal ontology's terms despite the reference to *il y a*, should have raised our suspicions, particularly when Levinas had warned us already that enjoyment of the elements as simple bathing did not describe concrete humanity. The recourse to the dweller in the home implicitly answers to that suspicion, that the elemental is not—cannot be—conceived as being constituted purely ontologically, as appearing in truth in relation to its *il y atic* being. In its being not initially hostile to me, the element should have referred us already to one who approaches in friendship and welcome, who “relieve[s] [the world] of its abrasiveness” for the sake of my enjoyment, as the very concrete mode of welcome.

The revelation of the home-making other as a crucial support of my relationship with being—as, in a way, determining the mode in which being appears to me and how I relate to it—seems consonant with several other points that Levinas makes along the way about our relationship with elemental alterity and the economies that unfold around my neediness, but which he does not explain or otherwise integrate. The most urgent of these

seems to me the notion that “dereliction” does not leave one without means—that even the economy of “body-effect,” in which I am at risk of being subjected to need that goes beyond enjoyment as positive pleasure and exaltation, is a worldly condition.

The future of the element as impersonal menace, which enables needy being to overwhelm the economy of satisfaction, is articulated by a “nocturnal dimension” that “[w]e have described [...] under the title of *il y a*” (TeI 116/TI 142). Yet *il y a* does not have the world-shattering effect that it had had in the past. Granted, it does trace out ontological difference “outside of being and of the world” (TeI 116/TI 142), I am not paralyzed by it, reduced to only the upsurge of a being in being. That unworldly or de-worlding effect Levinas transfers to another notion, in what is clearly a rebuke in guise of redefinition: *Geworfenheit*. Levinas writes:

The nocturnal prolongation of the element is the reign of mythic gods. Enjoyment is without security. But this future does not take the character of a *Geworfenheit*, for insecurity menaces an enjoyment already happy in the element [...].

We have described this nocturnal dimension of the future under the title of *il y a*. The element is prolonged in the *il y a*. Enjoyment as interiorization clashes with the very strangeness of the earth.

But it has recourse to work and possession (TeI 116/TI 143).

Enjoyment as the original motivation to live and arousal of subjectivity renders *il y a* a secondary or derivative event, and not an in-avoidable one. If one presses the point, *that* there is a “clash” between enjoyment and elemental being insofar as the element has its being and independence in its *il y a* futurity, still, this clash does not fundamentally undermine the corporeal self *because it has recourse to work and possession*. Thus if *Geworfenheit* means *déréliction* or abandonment to being, this comes in contrast to

subjection to the *il y a*tic future, which in no way implies that I am abandoned: rather, in the face of *il y a*, I have means, simply because I am enjoyment.<sup>73</sup>

This does not mean, however, that *Geworfenheit* ceases to have any significance, or is an empty notion. On the contrary, despite the brevity of its appearance in the text, it is highly significant. For on Levinas's reading, *Geworfenheit* is *not* an ontological structure of my being, but the situation in which I *entirely* lack means, which he describes as follows:

The limit case where need is imposed beyond enjoyment, the proletarian condition condemning one to cursed labor and where the indigence of corporeal existence finds neither refuge nor leisure at home—that is the absurd world of *Geworfenheit* (TeI 120/TI 146-147).

In Levinasian *Geworfenheit*, labor loses its fruitfulness *because* there is no refuge. True, one must already have enjoyed and so dwelt to fall to such a state; *Geworfenheit* is still derivative. But the condition of *Geworfenheit* is not an ontological evil, it is a *socially constructed condition*: it is *proletarian*; it is “imposed.” *Geworfenheit* derives from the denial of precisely that atmosphere of warmth and intimacy that renders the world familiar and fruitfully workable. *Geworfenheit*, in which the world is undone because the others abandon me, is violence itself imposed by the *unwelcome* of the other and the others.

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<sup>73</sup> In *Time and the Other*, for example, Levinas had argued that *Geworfenheit* implies existence preceding existents (specifically to *Da-Sein*, since Levinas is commenting on Heidegger), and that this existence prior to the existent signified as independent of the existent, and that this characterization of existence was the necessary condition for any claim that the existent is as “desertion and abandonment” (TA 25/TO 45). But Levinas had marshaled this analysis in 1948 in order to support his articulation of the notion of *il y a*, and claim it as a starting point overwhelmed, or rather undercut, ontological investigations that began by positing the subject-world (let alone a subject–absolute-other) relationship as a starting point.

If *Geworfenheit* means abandonment to being by others, who withhold from me the conditions that make the element a place for me and the affirmation of my powers, then we must revise the notion that the elements are “initially neither for me nor against” me (TeI 138/TI 164). When reduced to a relationship with my dwelling at home in intimacy with the home-making other *first of all*, my life immersed in the elements appears as mediated: the elemental milieu is not simply *there*, it consists first of all of flows directed to me (or held at bay away from me) by another person who does not appear to me. This directing of the elemental to me or toward me is what enables my first relationship with elements to sustain and arouse me to the joy of living, rather than condemning me to a helpless condition and eventually to being, not a subject of being, but simply being—a corpse. I would argue that Levinas's analysis of the dwelling and his redefinition or relocation of *Geworfenheit*, from ontological to social condition, gives us warrant to say that the “initial” neutrality of the elements with respect to me is an effect of the mediation of the other person, who does not abandon me to the elemental in which I could only suffer and die.<sup>74</sup>

But does not the fact that I would die without the relationship with the home-making other imply that my relationship with being is hostile because being is hostile to me? Does it not imply that my relationship with being is not wholly mediated by the other, but has a certain independence from that relationship?

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<sup>74</sup> Levinas himself does not argue this in *Totality and Infinity*, but it seems to me to be a consistent interpretation of certain points that he raises in the course of his larger analyses, and which, though infrequent and scattered, can be brought together in a way that situates our relationship with being clearly as supposing and signifying on the basis of social relationships of absolute alterity.



Levinas does not answer this question in a clear fashion. He does, however, offer an analysis of death that blocks any such straightforward interpretation of death as opening the authentic sense of my relationship with being, or of the sense of being itself. For Levinas situates my death *not* in relationship to being, but in relation to the relationships of peace and war within commerce and history, of violence and non-violence—significations that *only* relationships with personal others can sustain (TeI 172-173/TI 198). Insofar as “enjoyment” is life, enjoyment is, as Levinas has himself said, both joy and sorrow, both pleasure and suffering. When living is enjoyment—pleasure and joy—death does not appear on the horizon, nor does it appear *as* the horizon of my living my life. In sorrow, the horizon of my living life is not death, but the life I want to have lived and to live *now* (TeI 119/TI 120).<sup>75</sup> In so arguing, Levinas is in agreement with his earlier analyses of the world (DEE 56-57, 68/EE 28-29, 36-37): there is no reference to death contained within the upsurge of *agrément*.

When death “appears” and threatens in the heart of suffering, however, Levinas then claims, in a second move, that there is always *more* in death than my definitive assimilation to pure and anonymous existing:

Now, in order for there to be a separated being, in order that the totalization of history not be the ultimate design of being, it is necessary that death, which, for the survivor is an end, not be only this end; it is necessary that there be in dying [*le mourir*] another direction than that which leads to the end as to a point of impact in the duration of survivors (TeI 26/TI 55).

Or again:

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<sup>75</sup> Even so, Levinas claims (although he does not at that point prove) that the extreme situation of desiring to commit suicide presupposes a relationship with the other (TeI 119/TI 120).

interiority is the refusal to be transformed into a pure passive, figuring in foreign accounts. The anguish of death is precisely in this impossibility to cease, in the ambiguity of a missing time [*un temps qui manque*] and a mysterious time that remains still. Death which, consequently, is not reduced to the end of a being. [...] Death is, for a being to whom all arrives in conformity with its projects, an absolute event, absolutely a posteriori (TeI 27/TI 56).<sup>76</sup>

What constitutes the “more” of mortality, this deathly excess that makes possible precisely the *anguish* of death? Without entering into the well-known analyses of the face, which we need not repeat here, suffice it to say that as Levinas sees the matter, if one could simply cease, if death were a *power* of the self, there would be no anguish for it would fulfill precisely the exercise of my being, or would be anything other than my projection of it; and yet there is anguish in the face of death.

No wonder, then, that my death is not analyzed in terms of my relationship with the world, nor affirmed as simply an endpoint in another's continuity or history! Life and death both signify and have their sense in relation to the other [*autrui*]. The excess involved in my dying and my death, that which makes death other than a direct and primary relationship with being, is my relationship with the other to whom I call for succor, for medicine,<sup>77</sup> and sometimes for clemency (TeI 209/TI 232-233).<sup>78</sup> I confront,

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<sup>76</sup> Levinas had also said this in *Time and the Other*, tracing the moment when suffering opened onto death as a relation with a “mystery” (TA 56-57/TO 69-71). One might see Levinas's analysis of death in *Totality and Infinity* as articulating the terms of this mystery in the heart of death.

<sup>77</sup> TeI 210/TI 234.

<sup>78</sup> “Death is interpreted in all the philosophical and religious tradition either as a passage to nothingness, or else as a passage to another existence [...]. One thinks in this alternative of being and nothingness, that the death of our neighbors who, effectively, cease to exist in the empirical world accredits, which signifies for this world, disappearance or departure. We will approach it as nothingness in a more profound fashion and in some manner a priori, in the passion of murder” (TeI 208-209/TI 232). The nothingness/being alternative

as it were, my death, and interpret its meaning in relation to the personal others to whom I call, with whom I am already in relation, and who may involve themselves in my dying—facilitating, easing, preventing, or fighting my death, or perhaps even inflicting it as the “supreme” form of suffering (TeI 216/TI 239)—in any number of ways from out of their prior relationships with me.<sup>79</sup>

### Conclusions

From the preceding considerations, it becomes possible to propose that in *Totality and Infinity*, being is mediated absolutely by my relationship with the other person(s). Despite this, however, Levinas's text does not lead to this conclusion unproblematically. One major difficulty in arriving at this conclusion lies in the lack of support provided it by Levinas's analysis of time: if relationships with being are thoroughly and completely mediated by the relationship with the personal other, then one would expect the time of the other to be a past preceding my own original enjoyment. However, the time of the other [*autrui*] is not worked out as a past exceeding the past that I can remember and retain: the other instead temporalizes as present, in a presentation as self-manifestation, speaking *kath' auto* (TeI 21/TI 50-51); or else, as Levinas describes in the phenomenology of *eros* and fecundity, the other's presence in the present initiates a

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within which we conceive of death, in other words, is a relationship with being that is mediated by our relationship with death as inflicted by another.

<sup>79</sup> My death in *Totality and Infinity* is almost always interpreted in view of its untimeliness, of its coming too soon, which is why Levinas considers the “passion” of death as always having a murderous element to it (TeI 209-211/TI 232-235). He acknowledges, however, in the late writing, “To die for...” (1987) that relationships with personal others need not lead to (my) death appearing as murderous: see the analysis of Saul and Jonathan at EN 228/ENe 215.

rupture with my present that signifies a future that is not simply mine, but the time of the other who is my child (TeI 245-247/TI 267-267).

The failure to develop a temporality consistent with those strands of Levinas's analysis that point to the other [*autrui*] as relating to me prior to my relationship with being<sup>80</sup> may result from Levinas himself not being fully conscious of the changes he has wrought in his own work. He has given a set of phenomenological analyses that try to wield phenomenology beyond the confines of ontology and its tasks. But has he fully assimilated all of the consequences of such an approach? It is not clear that he has, and one sign of this is his attempt to carry the phenomenology of *eros* and fecundity forward from the 1940s, where it had responded to the problem of escape from the fatal ontology, and insert it nearly unaltered into *Totality and Infinity*. In the 1940s, when the fatality of being had been made manifest in the notion of fate, of the *fait accompli*, and of the timelessness of *il y a*tic presence and the present of the instant, the future alone remained for alterity, whether of the world with its compensatory continuum of instants, or of the social relationship with personal others.

In *Totality and Infinity*, the phenomenology of *eros* and fecundity is also explicitly articulated as a relationship in which a future arises that exceeds the conditions and self-interest of my own self-identification (TeI 245-246/TI 267-268). Nevertheless, there is a difference, despite the temporality of alterity remaining the same in both phenomenologies of *eros* and fecundity: in *Totality and Infinity*, rather than articulating

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<sup>80</sup> Reading the phenomenology of dwelling and of filiality, one thinks inevitably of parental desire for a child, whom they love and seek and hope for before the child exists and begins to live.

the major mode of sociality between myself and the essentially other and opening an escape from the simple reiteration of ontological difference, the phenomenology of *eros* and fecundity has now to answer to the *problem* of my historical and commercial relationships with others (TeI 201-208/TI 226-232). *Eros* and fecundity do not respond to the problematic of escape from being-as-ontological-difference that they had been intended to address in the 1940s, but seem finally to respond to the question of how to prevent my life, as a historical life involved in works and commerce with *others*,<sup>81</sup> from being merely an endpoint in an objectified time continuum constituted *by the survivor* (TeI 26/TI 55). The problematic of the commerce-history relationship is not an ontological problem, to be solved by working out what it would mean to escape (my) being; it is rather to be solved by discovering the conditions under which I can apologize to the others for my living my life in the face of death, and in such a fashion that the apology is not simply another of my works, since a work is necessarily severed from my living and objectified (TeI 195-208, 217-218/TI 220-232, 240-241). The problem of commerce and history is an interpersonal problem, a problem of the signification of my living my life in relationship with absolute alterity, when I will no longer be present to contest the interpretation of my living my life by the surviving others, who will interpret it as a moment of history: “The verdict of history is proffered by the survivor, who no longer speaks to the being he judges and to whom the will appears and is offered as a

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<sup>81</sup> In other words, it is to the problem presented by others when one goes “beyond the face” to the multiplicity of faces that the phenomenology of *eros* and fecundity responds—Levinas signals this by placing his analyses of *eros* and fecundity and attendant phenomena (filiality and fraternity) in the section entitled “Beyond the Face,” instead of in a hypothetical section called “Beyond Being.”

result and as a work” (TeI 218/TI 240). Yet a work, as noted, is necessarily incapable of expressing my will, of allowing me to speak in person in my own defense against being interpreted as a moment of a history constituted by the collectivity of survivors, each of whom locate themselves, as it were, as the end of history (TeI 202/TI 227).<sup>82</sup> Here, my reduction to the impersonality of historical being is not something that simply *happens*, it is conditioned by the survival of the personal others.<sup>83</sup>

This transplantation of the phenomenology of *eros* and fecundity to a new context with a new problem—one constituted not by ontology but precisely by the violence and peace that non-ontological relationships articulate between the self-identifying subjectivity and personal alterities—should fundamentally alter the sense of these phenomena. It is not, despite one or two brief references, *il y a* and the fatal ontology that drive the development of the phenomenology of *eros* and its issuance in children, but violence among people: a properly moral violence, one might say, insofar as one accepts that the alterity of the other is not ontologically constituted, even if my self-sameness in some sense is. Yet the time of alterity remains the future, while the past signifies ambiguously: on the one hand, existential, elemental alterity clearly is past within the

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<sup>82</sup> I do not intend, by using the term “end of history,” to evoke a careful consideration of the history of this phrase in the works of other philosophers. I use it because it fits the analysis: the survivor's position is necessarily, with respect to all those who have died, at the end of the history that has led up to the survivor's coming to be and being in this moment.

<sup>83</sup> It is true that Levinas *tries* to make the phenomenology of *eros* and fecundity respond to an ontological problem within the phenomenology itself. If, however, one has already considered the possibility that this phenomenology is largely lifted from past works without significant alteration, even where this is warranted by analyses in *Totality and Infinity* (i.e., the temporalization of alterity), then there is no reason to suppose that such efforts are anything but an artifact of his earlier work to develop the fatal ontology, rather than a response to the conditions obtaining in *Totality and Infinity*.

constitution of sensible subjectivity: it arouses me to enjoyment. Despite its role in constituting me, Levinas does not admit elemental alterity as an absolute alterity, i.e., an exteriority irreducible to my interiority, or to my living my life as self-identification.<sup>84</sup> And he even argues that the *il y a*tic dimension of the elements, by which they signify as independent of me and other than me, temporalizes as the threatening future, which seems consonant with older patterns of analysis that sought escape from ontology.

However, as we have seen, Levinas's reading of Husserl, which so heavily informs the way in which Levinas seeks the horizon of sense in the situation of subjectivity in *Totality and Infinity*, had already pointed to the essential lag time of subjectivity insofar as subjectivity is sensibility, an animated body. In the analysis of subjectivity's self-identification, we also saw the dwelling come to have a significance disproportionate to its length and development, particularly if one were to assume that the analysis of interiority's economy were a series of modifications that moved sequentially to each mode of being as founded on the previous one and in turn founding the next. In fact, it is the dwelling that founds *all* of these modes of interiority, and it does so only because of the home-making other in the home. If the relationship with elemental being constitutes me as following the provocation of an alterity that is revealed as an aliment, then if the home-making other mediates my relationship with the element, the time of that other is a past prior to the past of elemental being. But a past prior to elemental being's past would be a past before my time, not futurity.

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<sup>84</sup> On the problematic relationships of interiority and exteriority, see Peperzak and Bautista, "Unspoken Unity."

If subjectivity is sensibility, and the problem involved in the analysis of sensibility is the constitution of sense, then evidently the lag time that constitutes me in relation to the personal other especially, which displaces even the lag time of the elemental or impersonal other, is the pertinent temporal horizon Levinas should analyze in order properly to distinguish the priority of the personal other from the priority of the element. Yet Levinas does not attempt to reduce the alterity of the personal other to a past irrecoverable by my tardy presence and identification, nor does he attempt such a distinction between an elemental past and the past of the personal other. The primacy of the metaphysical relationship, and the dependency of the elemental and the world on the home-making other who, as other, does not appear and who remains in some sense concealed in her caring for me, nevertheless suggests that if the temporality of elemental being and the personal other is reanalyzed, then there will be a need to reappraise the evaluation of being as evil or even as simply amorally neutral.

A further consequence of the shift of problems between 1940 and 1961, which is not truly acknowledged, is a change in what I will call “the subject of salvation.” When the problem was escape from ontological evil, the relationship with personal alterity, or sociality, *saved me from being*.<sup>85</sup> In *Totality and Infinity*, by contrast, the overwhelming

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<sup>85</sup> This point differs somewhat from that made by such commentators as Arnold Davidson, who describe the difference between Levinas's earliest original philosophical writings and his later ones as having to do with how Levinas understands transcendence: for Davidson, in Levinas's earliest writings, transcendence is transcendence of one's “concrete attachments,” including one's body (Davidson 44), whereas in his later writings transcendence is my transcendence toward the other in responsibility (Davidson 44-45). Davidson's emphasis on transcendence, which does point out that transcendence defines the dignity of the subject, nevertheless does not focus attention on the fact that in later philosophical inquiry, the dignity of the subject implies prior ethical depravity that victimized *someone else*, whereas earlier philosophical efforts did not necessarily imply that the subject in need of salvation had to be considered ethically



trend of analysis is to show that the other is in peril from *me*, and must be saved from my own violence. This has resulted in some very peculiar analyses in which the subject of salvation from violence seems to be, for pages upon pages of analysis, me, but which end by shifting abruptly to the other as subject of salvation from violence.<sup>86</sup> The familiar problem of commentators, that Levinas seems to undercut every basis on which I as subject could bring a claim against the other for violating me, has its origin in the combination of a covert shift, from a problem posed by being to a problem posed by alterity—a shift that retains nevertheless the general *idea* of ontological evil, and even tries to bring forward analyses tied to that problem and insert them into *Totality and Infinity* without significant change. In a sense, my supposed proximity to the fatal ontology as a subject of being, covers the shift, for thanks to Levinas's earlier work, we are predisposed to interpret subjectivity as ontological subjectivity, and to interpret the other person as my sole escape and salvation from an ontological evil that threatens to undo me.

*Totality and Infinity* is a work of transition: it retains elements of what had been worked out before in the 1930s and 1940s while differing from that earlier work significantly. But it also differs from the work that will follow it. Why does Levinas's phenomenology seem to change after 1961, focusing more closely on language and

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depraved; ontological evil presupposes nothing concerning one's ethical relationships, only that one exists. See Arnold I. Davidson, "1933-1934: Thoughts on National Socialism; Introduction to Musil and Levinas," *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 1 (1990): 35-45.

<sup>86</sup> See Bautista and Peperzak, "Unspoken Unity."

returning to an explicit consideration of ontological difference? We know that Levinas had said already, in the final page of his preface to *Totality and Infinity* that he would have to “retract” [*dédire*] what he had said over the course of his book: “[C]an one speak of a book as if one had not written it, as if one were the first critic of it?” (TeI xviii/TI 29) The desire to criticize immediately implies that Levinas is not insensitive to the difficulties of analysis under which *Totality and Infinity* labors: as we shall see in the next chapter, he will address the temporality of alterity and the original significance of being in very different terms in *Otherwise Than Being*. To this text, and the final analysis of this dissertation, we turn now.

CHAPTER FIVE  
BEING AND THE WORK OF JUSTICE

**A Tale of Two Differences**

When Levinas wrote the preface for *Totality and Infinity*, a preface that bears all the hallmarks of having been written last, he claimed that he had to “take back” [*dédire*] what he had said (TeI xviii/TI 30), and that his preface was an attempt to take back ahead of time what he had said in the book already—what, from the reader's perspective, he would say in the nearly three hundred pages to come. To take back is, however, to place self-criticism in negative terms: in the analysis of subjectivity and alterity, time and language, all based in sensibility, that comprises *Otherwise than being*, Levinas gives a positive content to his *dédire* of *Totality and Infinity*. To ask what his retraction consists in, then, is to ask what Levinas has changed in his account of the relationship internal to being and relationships that transcend being,<sup>1</sup> and why.

There is, to be sure, a great deal of continuity between *Otherwise than being* and Levinas's other work. The sense or nature of transcendence remains a central theme: is it a senseless term? What would be required to say that it is not? Why is this even a question? Levinas insists that the “problem of transcendence [...], and the problem of

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<sup>1</sup> These relationships are, specifically, the ethical face-to-face relationship and relationships of justice.

subjectivity irreducible to essence—irreducible to essential immanence—go together”

(AE 20/OB 17).<sup>2</sup> And the site of inquiry into transcendence does not change: sensibility.

As in earlier works, transcendence is in question because ontology seems to monopolize thinking and discourse, and thereby to monopolize the constitution of sense. Inasmuch as all of Levinas's work struggles with ontology, a struggle born of the suspicion that ontology fails to allow for the sense of goodness to appear, nothing has changed.

*Otherwise than being* even returns us to a direct confrontation with ontological difference, a strategy reminiscent of his pre-*Totality and Infinity* work. In keeping with his focus on transcendence and ontology, Levinas dedicates the book to developing the resources that will allow him to say: ontological difference is inadequate to articulate problems posed by the phenomenon, or rather enigma, of sense and its constitution. If ontology depends on articulating the difference between being and a being, then Levinas asks whether another difference, a difference not constitutive of being's intelligibility, but of its sense, conditions ontology itself. In other words, does sense—in general and the sense of ontology in particular—depend upon a relationship that transcends ontological difference? *Otherwise than being* is the extended attempt to build up the concepts needed to say, “Yes.”

We may say, then, by way of shorthand, that *Otherwise than being* is a tale of two

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<sup>2</sup> What comes in the elided portion of the text is the conjunction of the problem of transcendence with that of God. The problem of God, however, is one that I will not be able to address in this analysis, unhappily. The focus must remain on the handling of being and ontology in relation to Levinas's development of diachronic sensibility, and the point of instability and subversion within essence, namely, the Saying.

differences, and of the attempt to show that ontological difference in fact makes sense only because of another, non-ontological difference. The structure of sense itself, the situation between a self and personal alterity, is, for Levinas, the very horizon of ontological difference and so of being in whatever form or mode it may take—and this constitutes the novelty of *Otherwise than being's* treatment of being. Being in fact takes on a new meaning in *Otherwise than being*: justice.<sup>3</sup> It will be my task to show how Levinas supports this reduction of essence, which is structured by ontological difference, to justice, and to show both the advance that this represents over *Totality and Infinity*, but also the problems left unresolved by Levinas.

The linchpin of Levinas's analyses remains sensibility, an orientation that, as we have seen, he inherits from Husserl, thanks to his rereading of Husserl, in and after 1940. We have seen already that of Husserl's analyses of sensibility, those most important to Levinas, generate an account of the motivation of intentionality, an account of the motivated-because-sensitive body at the origin of the world. Levinas's own development of Husserlian sensibility, in both *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than being*, tends to retain the importance of the motivational moment that sensibility confronts us with, for it is in the motivational moment that sensibility reveals the essential dependence of sensibility on an other in order that it move and live. Sensibility lets Levinas articulate self-identification's structure and movement as irreducible to the way that other,

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<sup>3</sup> Levinas had argued in *Totality and Infinity* that *my* being or egoist self and its specific possessions were “for the other”; however, he had not yet attempted to extend this claim to a general statement about being and beings.

impersonal beings are identified. The self, as origin, identifies itself, always, while other beings are made to-be-present-as-this or-as-that<sup>4</sup> *for the self*, and are interpreted through systematic reference to other beings. The constitution of the identity of other beings is a moment of the corporeal, sensitive self's self-identification. Sensibility's movement then shows and signifies the incapacity of the self to accomplish anything beyond or other than itself. We had seen, however, that this claim was rendered questionable, because the time of the world as a continuum was not simply equivalent to the timeless instant: if the world remained for-me, still, it was beyond the fatal ontology of the 1940s fully to account for it. *Totality and Infinity's* account, by largely eliminating reference to hypostasis, more convincingly presented the pulsative durational time of the world as originally the time of my living my life, and so could plausibly claim that the worldly self-identification of subjectivity only accomplished my identity. And yet even this originality of worldly self-identification, as my first identification and as a relationship between myself and being, was cast into doubt by the difficulty of integrating the absolute priority of the home, with its necessary reference to a home-making other, into the account of my original, identificational relationship with being.

Levinas needs a time analysis of the responsiveness characteristic of sensibility to move away from the focus on the self-identifying function of sensibility. But when he analyzes sensibility as motivated and constituted “pre-originally” by an other, it becomes hard to restrict what Levinas will call in *Otherwise than being* the “diachronic” structure

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<sup>4</sup> That is, they are *identified*, but do not *self-identify*, because they are not origins.

of time to a relationship between a self and a *personal* other rather than between the self and an impersonal being.

Levinas will attempt to resolve these issues in his analyses of *Otherwise than being*, which go beyond what he had done in *Totality and Infinity* by reconsidering the function of language in relation to being, and in tying the diachronic structure of time to responsibility. His efforts do not wholly succeed, in my estimation, though they do support the analysis of the priority of the face in *Totality and Infinity*. Moreover, from the attempt to develop an analysis that resolves these difficulties, justice emerges as the new sense of being and ontology, a sense more primordial than identification, in which a being shows in the truth of its being.

To say that the sense of being is justice is a sea change, and deserves attention from anyone interested in the analysis of Levinas's ontology (or better, ontologies), because it violates the parameters of the problem that had spurred Levinas to struggle with ontology in the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>5</sup> If the good must be sought beyond being, this implies that it is not to be found within the structures of being, and that this failure, as Levinas had argued, signified not as an a-morality of being, but as an *evil of being*, which posed a problem that Levinas had to resolve, namely, how to escape it. Nearly forty years later, Levinas has reversed the signification of being as well as its fundamental role: if

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<sup>5</sup> Simon Critchley has also argued that Levinas ends in *Otherwise than being* with a “justified Said” (Critchley, *Ethics and Deconstruction*, 229). This is in many ways my own position, that what Levinas has tried to say in *Otherwise than being* is the Said—being, ontology—in its moment of justification. Justification is worked out phenomenologically: it is revealed through the reduction of the Said to a different moment (and moments) of difference that are ambivalently and ambiguously involved in the articulation of Saying.

*Otherwise than being* begins with the problem being poses for transcendence, it ends by posing and answering a problem that transcendence itself poses, and which being alone can resolve.

Does Levinas fully appreciate the difference between his ontology in *Otherwise than being* and earlier ontologies? Between the role ontology had played as posing the fundamental problematic Levinas's work would have to address, and the role it plays now as responding to a problem posed by a sensible relation that transcends being and its ontology? It is not clear that he does. As an index of how fully the shift in the function and sense of being has been integrated into Levinas's findings, we will end by examining his handling of *il y a*.

### **Ontological Difference: Essence and Language**

Levinas begins with the hypothesis: “If transcendence has a sense, it can only signify the fact that, for the *event of being*—for *esse*—for *essence* to pass to the other of being” (AE 3/OB 3). Only if essence, which is the “event of being,” passes into the other of being does transcendence have any sense. If we accept this hypothesis provisionally, in order to follow Levinas's work, it generates the terms by which to test it: one must be able first of all to delineate essence, or being, so that one can begin to consider both what would count as the “other of being” or the “otherwise than being” (AE 3/OB 3), and what movement the term “passes” describes.<sup>6</sup>

If transcendence is the passage of essence to the other of being, what is the

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<sup>6</sup> Although see pp. 230-234 below on the possible infelicity of this terminology.



relationship between the terms “essence” and “being”? What is essence? Essence *is* being, but not as a positive individual, nor as an insubstantial flow or nothingness: Levinas writes that “the term *essence* expresses [...] *being* [*être*] different from *a being* [*étant*], the German *Sein* distinct from *Seiendes*, the Latin *esse* distinct from the scholastic *ens*” (AE ix/OB xlvii). The accent is on distinction, on difference: specifically, the difference between being and a being. In other words, essence is *ontological difference*, around which fundamental ontologies after Heidegger have been built.

If we take only the formal definition of essence offered here, and ignore its eventual articulation, then we see that what once he had worked to articulate in the 30s and 40s<sup>7</sup>—i.e., ontological difference—Levinas now summarizes with a single term: *essence*. In terms of content, however, there are changes, which will occupy us over the course of the present chapter. For the moment, we want to consider *Otherwise than being* as “taking back” certain aspects of *Totality and Infinity*. What has changed in Levinas's conceptualization of ontological difference?

The most striking difference is his new insistence on the unsurpassable, inescapable relationship between being and language.<sup>8</sup> Where in *Totality and Infinity*, the

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<sup>7</sup> And which he had described as the play between the presence of *il y a*tic eternity and hypostatic presence in the instant. Despite the occasional footnote or terminology that suggests continuity between Levinas's first efforts to articulate ontological difference and his work in *Otherwise than being*, it is not at all clear that this description of ontological difference actually survives Levinas's 1974 analysis of essence.

<sup>8</sup> Levinas had developed this link with particular emphasis in “Langage et Proximité” in EDE 217-236. English pagination correlates with Alphonso Lingis's, which can be found in *Collected Philosophical Papers*; Emmanuel Levinas (1998), for the simple reason that *Discovering Existence with Husserl* (1998) does not include this essay.

relationship with the world of beings was a silent relationship, whose silence was not a silencing *of* speech, but a silence not correlated with speech, a silence that marked a relationship other than metaphysical or ethical, in *Otherwise than being*, the link between being and language occurs almost immediately. Being is a verb, he claims, and the other of being, an utterance [*énoncé*] (AE 4/OB 3-4). What can such claims mean?<sup>9</sup>

*Language* has come to be the mode in which Levinas articulates both being and the other of being (transcendence). The transcendent functioning of language is familiar to us from *Totality and Infinity*; but in *Otherwise than being*, Levinas associates being with what appears to be one part of language (a verb), and transcendence with “an utterance,” which is related to being as a verb. In his examination of being as verb, we are confronted with language that does not articulate transcendence, but rather ontology. This is new: in *Otherwise than being*, language has an ontological function that it had not had in *Totality and Infinity*.<sup>10</sup>

When language functions ontologically, it appears as a system of words,<sup>11</sup> which

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<sup>9</sup> It is true that Levinas has called being a verb since the 1940s, but he has not developed the implications of being-as-verb so explicitly or in such detail before.

<sup>10</sup> Or which had not been developed in *Totality and Infinity*: to the degree that language played a role in objectivation, Levinas admitted some connection between language and being, but he had eventually tied this objective functioning to the relationship to the other. Language could propose a world to the other, or put the world forward to the other. See TeI 148-149/TI 173-174; see also TeI 147,155/TI 172-173, 180.

<sup>11</sup> In defiance of the thesis of contemporary hermeneutics, which identifies the basic unit of sense as the sentence, Levinas seems to understand the basic unit of sense on which language operates to be the individual word. This is certainly consonant with rabbinic Scriptural hermeneutics, which operates at the level of the word and even of the letters within a word (Holtz 21-22). It is also both consistent with and comprehensible within the proclamatory or kerygmatic relationship between language and being that Levinas himself describes in “Language and Proximity,” and which we will examine below.

are divided into nouns [*noms*]<sup>12</sup> and verbs (AE 30/OB 23).<sup>13</sup> Words bear meanings, but also function: they *designate* (AE 29/OB 23). Designation *shows* the truth of the being of a being, by proclaiming its identity, that is, by identifying a being as-X or as-Y.

Designation is *monstration* (AE 30/OB 23), which comes to pass in the apophantic structure of designatory language, and never occurs without the sense that it establishes as the being-in-truth or being-in-untruth of a being (AE 30/OB 23). Ontologically, sense occurs by identifying a being, which establishes its unity across the continual succession of appearances, i.e., its truth. Language, by whose designating function the being of a being appears in truth, articulates both being and an individual being. Thanks to language, the terms of ontological difference appear simultaneously, unfolding difference in the very moment that the identity of an individual being is constituted.

Levinas argues therefore that language opens our relationship with being: the original relationship we, as thought and understanding, maintain with being, is linguistic. If language identifies by apophansis, however, then language is neither a mere *expression* of the sense of being (as though sense were contained in being and accessed through experience of being, then translated into words that expressed the experience, and so the sense of a being), nor does it unfold as simply an arbitrary association of one being (an objective entity) with another entity (a sound) (LP 220/LaP 112). As an original

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<sup>12</sup> The difference between a noun and a name constitutes an ambiguity. Proper names evacuated of all content and serving simply to invoke someone are allowed to carry a significance that transcends ontology in the way that an improper or common name, i.e., a noun, does not.

<sup>13</sup> There are adverbs, too, among them “otherwise,” but the basic division in language for Levinas is that between verb and noun.

relationship between thought and being, language is “indifferent” to experience, without being merely arbitrary with respect to the being that is experienced: the apophansis that language operates is precisely *proclamatory*, or *kerygmatic* (LP 219/LaP 111-112; AE 45-47, 125-126/OB 35-37, 99-100).

All of this differs from *Totality and Infinity*, where the relationship to being does not originally come through language, but by way of silent enjoyment. Despite certain telling inconsistencies and hesitations, on the whole, Levinas in *Totality and Infinity* could argue that identity was *stabilized* by the advent of speech between the personal other and myself: the world gained a stable, i.e., objectified, structure thanks to the propositional relationship between myself and the other (TeI 184/TI 209). The notion that language is a reinforcement of identity, a stabilizing or shoring up of the world as a coherent, identifiable field of beings in their being, implies that the first relationship with being that we maintain is not linguistic, and that enjoyment is outside of, and prior to, language.

*Otherwise than being*, by contrast, begins with ontological difference and identification, which are linguistically articulated from the first. Essence, or ontological difference, is therefore called “the Said” (AE 6/OB 5), and the terms of the Said, verb and noun, correlate with *being* and beings: the “verb to be” functions by identifying a noun, i.e., a being. And as in Levinas's early ontologies, where distinguishing existence from an existent was the first challenge, Levinas takes care to note the ambiguity of these terms, verb and noun. The verb is a process that performs a function, but it appears only in the

noun that it nominates: “the process, in the grip of designation, be it a movement, is shown, but immobilized and fixed in the *Said*” (AE 23/OB 30). That is, the verb itself appears fixed in a noun, which, in its ambiguity as designating that which is processing, we can say functions as a participle. If essence is ontological difference that *persists* in being itself,<sup>14</sup> essence is the participial *Said*, which reiterates itself, and can be decomposed in every instant into the correlative elements or moments of verb and noun, flux and fixity.

However, the *persistence* of essence, which is the persistence of being ontological difference, implies that this continual reiteration of the *Said* is more properly conceived as a failure<sup>15</sup> of essence to accomplish anything other than its own movement, namely the monstration of truth. Since monstration shows the beings in their being, and so in the truth of being, essence fails, then, to say anything but truth.<sup>16</sup> In terms of individual beings, the failure to accomplish anything but essential identification takes the form of a

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<sup>14</sup> “Essence is exerted [*s'exerce*] [...] as an invincible persistence in essence, filling every interval of nothingness that would come to interrupt its exercise. *Esse* is *interesse*. Essence is interessence” (AE 4/OB 4). The “inter-” of “interessence” (awkwardly translated as “interestedness” to capture in English what is evident without effort in French) is difficult at first to explain, but may be understood as the reiteration of ontological difference, which is to say the differentiation of verb and noun that occurs in the act of identification, where a being is monstrated in its being, and signifies in the truth of being. Differentiation implies a passing from indifference to difference between verb and noun; and that essence is a persistence in essence implies the continual passing between verb and noun as differentiated to verb and noun as undifferentiated, so that ontological difference persists dynamically, as the continual reiteration of ontological difference.

<sup>15</sup> To hearken back to earlier writings, in which the fact that the fatal ontology could only accomplish its own differentiation, and the hypostatic self could only accomplish itself as differentiated from *il y a*tic being. This is a “failure” in Levinas's approach, for it does not articulate goodness.

<sup>16</sup> Or to accomplish the exhibition of the exhibited, or to present a being as present somehow, to run through a list of equivalent formulations in the registers of language, logic, sensibility, and time.

positive phenomenon, which Levinas calls the “*conatus* of beings” [*conatus des étants*] (AE 4/OB 4). He refers this striving to be back to his analyses of the self-affirming, self-preserving, and self-expanding enjoyment of the Ego, which accomplishes only the self, and lays the basis for war among the multiplicity of beings whose being is striving to be [*conatus essendi*] (AE 4-5/OB 4).<sup>17</sup>

Now that the basic way in which being and language have been conjoined in Levinas's latest ontology has been clarified, it remains to point out certain assumptions, without which the investigation of the sense of transcendence, or whether it has one, would not make sense. That there is no limit on the scope of ontology is the *sine qua non* attending Levinas's articulation of ontological difference: ontology is not only the first relationship we can maintain (or better, sustain), it is the field within which any relationship whatsoever takes shape. The sense of any particular word or being<sup>18</sup> is assumed to depend upon the monstration of the being in its being, or the mobilization of essence so that the being shows in its being or signifies as its truth (or untruth). This assumption is not Levinas's *per se*, but he accepts it from the phenomenological movement broadly construed. Why accept this assumption? Because its warrant is the strong tendency to make the sense of a being depend upon its *being*. This is a real tendency in human thought, and certainly in philosophical thought, and as such deserves

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<sup>17</sup> See TeI 195-201/TI 220-226 and the preface, ix-xiii/21-26.

<sup>18</sup> And if all words, under this ontological paradigm, designate, and designation is the showing up of the verb “to be” in the noun that it names, there is no separation between being and a word.

a certain amount of respect precisely *as a phenomenon*.

That the sense of transcendence can *only* emerge if essence “passes” to the other of being, assumes for its part both that ontology constitutes sense originally and exhaustively among phenomena, and that the ontological constitution of the sense of the word “transcendence” restricts it to a relationship between beings or between being and beings, or else renders it a senseless word that shows no thing, nor even ontological difference.

For Levinas, the next question, after the internal structure and function of essence has been analyzed, and assuming that sense as truth universally is constituted ontologically, must be: Is there a difference other than ontological? Or, if Levinas claims that being is the “verb *par excellence* where [...] *essence* is exposed, is nominalized” (AE 54/OB 42), is there a function for verbs *other* than monstration, which the verb as (only?) “to be” accomplishes? If there are verb and noun, saying [*dire*] and said [*dit*] (AE 44-45, 47-49/OB 34-35, 37-38), and if these compose *the Said*, which is thereby constituted as “the amphibology of being and a being” (AE 29/OB 30), then is there a Saying that is amphibolous in some other fashion than between being and a being? Must saying only signify insofar as it “resonates” (AE 51-55/OB 40-43), i.e., monstrates a noun? Must saying always correlate with a said, in a unifying relationship that cannot be reduced (AE 48/OB 37)?

If, as I claim, the entirety of *Otherwise than being* is an attempt to say “yes” to a difference that is irreducible to the differential movement of language that structures

being, the first resource Levinas must develop is a reduction that can put us in a position to respond to the very questions posed.

### **The Reduction of Ontology to Sensibility**

Absent from the above ontology is any account of sensibility. This absence of the sensible is due in part to perspective, but in part to its privileged place in Levinas's reduction and redescription of subjectivity, which causes him to reserve discussion of sensibility until he has performed a reduction of ontology to sensibility. If “the adverb *otherwise* [*autrement*] [...] inevitably is related to the verb to be,” such that “the signified of the verb to be would be unavoidable [*inéluçtable*] in every said, thought, and felt” (AE 4/OB 4), then it *seems* that being, understood as essence, leaves no point of leverage against its apophantic identification. Yet, as Levinas notes, the structural parallelism between the said, the thought, and the felt is weakest in the case of the felt and its intention, feeling. Without denying that feeling can function ontologically, in the monstration of identity, he argues that the way in which the felt is given to feeling differs most often from the apophantic paradigm of the said to saying and the thought to thinking.

For unlike ontological saying and its said, thinking and its thought, the terms of sensibility, the felt [*le senti*] and feeling [*le sentir*], are so ambiguous that even Husserl's efforts to restrict them to different moments of dipolar intentionality failed on its own terms (AE 39-41/OB 31-32). The sensible or the felt does not give itself in an ostension to a noetic consciousness, which, fully constituted, welcomes the sensible in an instant



(AE 40/OB 31). The instant, which once had shown itself capable of bringing to light ontological difference,<sup>19</sup> does not suffice to analyze the structure of sensibility. Ostensive intentionality—which accomplishes monstration—fails when sensibility is allowed to unfold on its own terms. For sensibility does not distance feeling from the felt: the feeling of the felt, which two terms intentionality traditionally would distinguish, are merged. The felt as felt does not appear before me in its being; the felt is felt in me, through my feeling of it. Similarly, does one see the taste of the tasty in the light of truth first of all? Does the softness of the soft appear as such in the light, as an individual being in its being? There comes a point when the language of such constructions, which are appropriate to monstration, the mode of ontological intentionality, becomes forced and inappropriate.

Levinas interprets sensibility's failure to function like noesis and understanding<sup>20</sup> in the identification of beings as indicating a different linguistic mode, and a different temporality as well (since the instant to which Husserl assigned it was inadequate to its manifestation). His own analysis breaks into different sections at this point, one dedicated to the reduction of ontological language to sensible language, and the other showing the reduction of internal time-consciousness, which is a synchronic mode of time based in the

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<sup>19</sup> See chapter two, pp. 70-77.

<sup>20</sup> Sensibility traditionally is a first and relatively primitive moment in the longer process of bringing to light the identity of a being, or of disclosing its truth. It is described as a deficient mode of understanding, or as a moment of understanding that itself requires being worked up by different syntheses of imagination, understanding, and reason. Levinas will cite Descartes (TeI 19, 56/TI 48, 84) and Kant (TeI 109, 162/TI 134-35, 188) as paradigmatically struggling to express, often in a cognitive-rationalist fashion, an insight into the peculiar character of sensibility and its "objects."

present, to time-sense, as it were, with a diachronic structure based in an immemorial past. These sections develop the account of sensibility by turns, but unfortunately provide us with no easy link between language and time; I will not attempt to fill this lacuna, but simply to lay out Levinas's reductions.

### From Ontological Language to Sensible Language: The Question Analysis<sup>21</sup>

What I will call, for convenience, the “question analysis” (AE 29-33/OB 23-26) is the first section of the first chapter of what Levinas calls “the exposition” (chapters two through five). In content, form, and placement (early in the book, as developing the direction of inquiry), the question analysis is an alternative to Heidegger's famous question analysis in *Being and Time*.<sup>22</sup> *Otherwise than being's* question analysis allows Levinas to reveal the moment in which questioning as *inquiry* [*recherche*] into the truth of a being (i.e., the being of a being) (AE 31/OB 24),<sup>23</sup> transmutes into a mode of questioning that “leagues” one to a personal Other [*allégeance à Autrui*] (AE 29/OB 23). By drawing out the difference between an inquiry and a plea, demand, prayer or similar

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<sup>21</sup> For the sake of such clarity as may be possible to bring to this analysis, the term “question analysis” has no history. It is a term of pure convenience. At no point in my reading of Levinas's question analysis is any claim made that language in its sensuous, affective dimension *must* be a question. Levinas's question analysis is clearly constructed as an opportunity to argue with Heidegger's question analysis while trying to show that the affective dimension of language has implications for the ultimate sense of the phenomenon of asking a question. The decision, then, to focus on language in the mode of questioning is rhetorical: it has to do with the relationship between Levinas and Heideggerian ontology, and the importance of Heidegger's work for philosophers writing after *Being and Time*.

<sup>22</sup> See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996), §2, H 5-8/3-7. Henceforth abbreviated “BT.” “H” preceding a page number refers to the pagination of the original German publication: *Sein und Zeit*, (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1953), but including the 14<sup>th</sup> edition's presentation of the marginal remarks.

<sup>23</sup> And whose structure is therefore unfolded first in its ontological functioning.

modes of questioning,<sup>24</sup> Levinas's question analytic shows the movement from questioning as an element of monstration, to questioning whose sense depends upon the affective character of language, and so as based in sensibility.<sup>25</sup> The reduction from ontology to sensibility marks the difference of direction between questioning as inquiry into the truth of being and questioning as a demand addressed to someone who can answer.

Levinas begins his question analytic by accepting that the philosopher seeks the truth, and that truth is (as he has already shown) an exhibition or monstration of being (AE 29/OB 23). Given this aim of philosophy, he then asks: "But what is shown under the name of being, in truth? And who looks?" (AE 29/OB 23) In the analysis that traces out the ontological implications of both these questions, Levinas stays very close to the procedure of Heidegger's analytic of the question in *Being and Time*, arguing that if the philosopher questions so that truth comes to light, then the philosophical question

utters a *what?* [*quoi?*], a *what is this...?* [*qu'est-ce?*], a *what is this that is...?* [*qu'est-ce qu'est?*] Concerning that which is, it is a matter of knowing *this* that it is.<sup>26</sup> [...] The question—and be it "what is being"—then interrogates in relation to

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<sup>24</sup> In general, Levinas plays on the ambiguity of the notion of a question, so that there he will write, for example, of the "question of the Question" (AE 31/OB 24), meaning the question of the question of the meaning of being, or the question of the inquiry; or he will speak of intelligibility becoming a question (AE 30/OB 24), where the question signifies a putting in question of intelligibility, whose basis becomes clear later.

<sup>25</sup> Because Levinas stresses the affective or sensible character of the phenomena that he takes as revelatory of an otherwise than ontological sense, it is worth stressing that it *is not necessary* to read him as simply excluding consciousness or intellect from analyses that bring out the sensible dimension of these phenomena. Rather, he shows the basis of such phenomena and provides a phenomenological foundation for the reinterpretation of their sense.

<sup>26</sup> The translation of the italicized terms in this first sentence is deliberately *extremely* (one might even say,

the being [*l'être*], in relation to that which is precisely in question. The response is immediately demanded in terms of being, which one understands as *a being*, or *being of the being*, a being or *essence* of being. The question *what?* is thus correlative of that which it wants to discover, and to which it already has recourse. Its quest unfolds entirely within being—at the heart of that which it only seeks. It is, simultaneously, *ontology* and has a part in the effectuation of the very being [*être*] that it seeks to understand (AE 30/OB 23-24).

When taken up within philosophical inquiry, which has already been identified as truth-seeking, the *who looks* question also and necessarily participates in the ontology of truth-showing: to question or inquire into..., no matter the content of the question, is to participate in the effectuation of being as essence, for it brings a being to light in its being (AE 34/OB 27). In so saying, Levinas accepts the validity of Heidegger's own analysis of the questioner's role in the bringing to light of the truth of being.<sup>27</sup> The ontological question directs us to, and is itself a first moment in the monstration of, the being of a being. Thus simply intending a “who,” i.e., the questioner, as the “object”<sup>28</sup> of inquiry—which for the sake of clarity and avoidance of problematic terminology should be called by its Heideggerian name, “*Befragtes*”—is in no way to question in a fashion that functions otherwise than ontologically. Ontologists are perfectly well able to ask this

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“to a fault”) literal, since Levinas is involved in slow, progressive build-up of the elements involved in asking, “*Qu'est-ce qu'est...*?”

<sup>27</sup> “If the question of being is to be explicitly formulated and brought to complete clarity concerning itself, then the elaboration of this question requires [...] explication of the ways of regarding being and of understanding and conceptually grasping its meaning, preparation of the right choice of the exemplary being, and elaboration of the genuine mode of access of this being. Regarding, understanding and grasping, choosing, and gaining access to, are constitutive attitudes of inquiry and are thus themselves modes of being of a particular being, of *the* being we inquirers ourselves in each case are. Thus to work out the question of being means to make a being—one who questions—transparent in its being” (BT H 7-8/5-6).

<sup>28</sup> In this instance, “object” does not mean *Vorhandenes* or *Zuhandenes*.

question and discover the truth of being.

So long as the question is an inquiry into being, and so long as the *Befragte* (in this case, “who,” “*quoi*”) is selected because questioning it orients the questioner toward truth, one will discover the onto-logic of truth, being, and the questioner. But is there a reason to assume that the relationship between the *Befragtes* and questioning *must* be guided by the truth of being, that questioning must be analyzed in terms of a direct (if “perplexing” [BT H1 /xix]) relationship between the questioner and being?

To this question, Levinas responds with an analysis of a peculiar aspect of the inquiry into the truth of being, which revolves around the presupposed intelligibility of being, without which ontological inquiry could not even arise:

If the question *what?*, in its adherence to being, is at the origin of every thought [...] every inquiry and every philosophy goes back to ontology, to the intellection of being and of a being, to the intellection of essence. Being would not only be the most problematic—it would be the most intelligible.

And yet, this intelligibility becomes a question. That intelligibility becomes a question—astounds [*étonne*]. Here is a problem, preliminary to the question *who?* and *what?* Why is there a question in exhibition? (AE 30/OB 24).

Heidegger's own opening salvo in *Being and Time*—the epigraph from Plato's *Sophist* concerning the perplexity of those inquiring into the meaning of being, who nevertheless are not opposed to those who are confident that they know what they mean when they utter the word “being,” in any of its forms<sup>29</sup>—sets up the double condition of

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<sup>29</sup> The perplexed are not opposable to the confident, for they came from their ranks, and the entirety of Heidegger's own analysis presupposes that the confident are not simply *wrong* to think that they know what being means. If being were not intelligible and were not implicitly understood already, his own work, as

questioning: that on the one hand, the phenomenon in question perplexes, i.e., gives rise to questioning, but on the other, that it is intelligible. Thus intelligibility and questioning are bound together. Being is, as Levinas notes, both the most problematic *and* the most intelligible phenomenon.

From this leaguing of questioning and intelligibility, Levinas, however, turns our attention to an implicit dimension of my relationship with being that prompts a question:<sup>30</sup> astonishment before the intelligibility of being. That being is intelligible itself provokes a kind of questioning that manifests as the affect of wonder or astonishment: we are amazed by intelligibility, or we can be amazed. Why, though, does the intelligibility of being strike us as astonishing? “Why is there a question in exhibition?” asks Levinas (AE 30/OB 24). And is this questioning of being’s very intelligibility, manifested or articulated in the affect of astonishment, an ontological question?

Astonishment does not participate in the exhibition of the truth of being, although it does concern the intelligibility of being, and so the fact of there showing a truth of being (however obscurely or problematically). Truth itself is astonishing—*why* should there be truth? And why should there be questions or inquiries *about* the truth? Is not truth that which is aimed at in questioning? Why should one ask “Why is there truth?” or

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one of the perplexed, would be fruitless for it would lack any phenomenological grounding.

<sup>30</sup> The perplexity that motivates some speakers in *Sophist* is translated into a concern for being in one’s very being by Heidegger. Levinas does not address this point here. To the degree that concern leads eventually to anxiety and care for being, Levinas’s position is well-known; but in the present analysis, one might say that he wants to arrest the movement to concern for being and inquiry into it early, by asking whether our perplexity is really addressed to *being*, or concerns being or the inquirer first of all.

“Why is there being?” What sort of question is *that*?

Levinas does not think that astonishment, as manifesting a question about the very fact of the intelligibility of being, is simply an ontological question. He does give a possible ontological response to the question, which remains oriented toward the structure of being and the relationship between the questioner's questioning and being:

there is a question because there is inquiry [*recherche*] and because the appearing of being is also the possibility of its appearance and because appearance dissimulates being in its very unveiling and because inquiry [*recherche*] into the truth must tear being from seeming [*paraître*] (AE 30/OB 24).

The response of this proposed response remains focused on the structure of being, which provokes inquiry.

To which Levinas poses a *protest*:

But the question of the Question is more radical. Why does inquiry become a question? How does it happen that the *what?* already plunged into being in order better to open it, becomes a demand and a prayer, special language, inserting into the 'communication' of the *given*, an appeal for succor, for aid addressed to the personal other [*autrui*]? (AE 30-31/OB 24)

Here, he introduces a distinction between inquiry and question, between the question of the meaning or truth of being, and another mode of questioning that is “more radical.” This more radical question—identified above as a demand, an appeal, a prayer, whose content is secondary but crucial—is a “special language” that does not simply communicate something, but makes palpable the appeal involved in speech. To see this, let us take, given that Levinas transitions from the question of the meaning of being (which is an inquiry) to the more radical question provoked by astonishment before the

intelligibility of being, the question *why?* “Why?” is the content of the question; it is possible to interpret it as an inquiry: as a question posed by the inquirer to a *Befragtes* in view of a theme or *Erfragtes*. Considered in this fashion, the inquiry remains between the questioner and that which is questioned, the thematic “object” or *Befragtes*. However, the *why?* question can also be interpreted to emphasize the relationship between the one posing the question and the one who answers it. *Why?* questions demand an answer from *someone*, and if there is no one to answer the question, still—one poses it out of a felt need for a response.<sup>31</sup> Levinas seems to be trying to show, by distinguishing an inquiry from a question, and linking the latter (in this case) to the astonishment before the intelligibility of being, that there is a sensible dimension even of inquiry that leads one to question beyond being: one poses a question to someone else about *the truth of being*, and demands thereby an answer (and not from being, but from the one questioned concerning the truth of being).<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Simon Critchley, in his *Ethics, Politics, Subjectivity* (1999), comes close to this point in his analysis of the parallels between psychoanalytic analyses of the structure of trauma and Levinas's analysis of substitution. In Critchley's analysis, the other “is perceived *als Ding* when it screams; that is the other presents itself in a pre-linguistic scream that traumatically recalls the subject's own screaming and its own memory of experience of pain” (210). In Levinas's analysis of the difference between an inquiry and a question, the sensuously accessed paradoxical proximity of intelligibility and perplexity that structures being's truth emerges not as inquiry, but as questioning, i.e., as a plea, a demand, a prayer *to the other* who can answer. Regardless of the differences between psychoanalytic theory and Levinas's phenomenology, the comparison helps to make visible what Levinas's text may not render as explicitly: a prayer, a demand, an appeal comes out of some form of unrest and always has an element of “screaming” involved in it. One does not calmly inquire; one questions out of felt urgency.

<sup>32</sup> One could also read this section in light of the inevitable return of skepticism, which Levinas analyzes at AE 210-218/OB 165-171. That the intelligibility of being astonishes introduces a questionability into the heart of the phenomenon which ought to be most clear, most understandable, least open to any sort of doubt or provocative of questions, for being is monstration of truth. Truth by its nature, if it is truth, should not be questionable, and yet the very movement by which any particular truth comes to light is now subject to a



Every demand made to another moreover implies concrete need, palpable to the questioner: the need for help, for aid and succor manifested in prayer and demand as appeals, refer us back to sensibility. If one maintains the context of an appeal for help in the matter of the astonishing intelligibility of being, then it reveals a sensuous moment of one's theoretical interest; if one follows the evocation the prayer for succor, this sensuous moment becomes all the more clear, bringing to mind as it does the demand for bread, for safety, for medicine, etc. And although one would be horrified by a false friend's response to one's appeal, the “truth” of the other person is not what motivates one to question in this fashion—what motivates is the need for... *from* you. The situation of the questioner in such an instance is one of distress or, at the least, an unquiet that seeks not truth but *help*, i.e., a helper, or someone who can answer me.

Drawing attention to the difference between questioning as an inquiry and questioning as an appeal, demand, prayer made to another reveals that inquiry *implies* questioning, i.e., an inquiry can explicitly address itself to a personal other (in a way reminiscent of how “just asking around” can become explicitly a worked-out theoretical inquiry in Heidegger's work [BT H 5/4]). The difference between inquiry and questioning as appeal then becomes, perhaps, a difference attributable to a certain abstraction attending inquiry as a moment of monstration: every inquiry implies a questioning of

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question that is not satisfied by this revelation of being. Likewise, skepticism poses a question in an untimely fashion: always when there should be no question. It also articulates the question in a way that seems to undercut its own warrant for questioning immediately, a characteristic of skepticism that Levinas interprets as a consequence of a time structure other than that of truth and monstration and ontology, of question and response not coming in the same time.

someone based on felt need of some sort (whether the needs of the intellect or of sensibility as such, on its own terms of enjoyment and pain). Hence ontological inquiry, when reduced, appears as a demand made *to someone*, as requiring an answer from someone, concerning the truth of being.

The sensible dimension of language that gives the sense of inquiry by reducing it to a question-*cum*-appeal appears in astonishment, urgency, neediness, etc., and even appears *as* astonishment, appeal, demand. The question analytic, in bringing out the difference between inquiry, which, if my argument is correct, is an unreduced mode of appeal, demonstrates, too, in its reduction of inquiry to appeal, the link between language and affect, language and emotion, language and *sensibility*. And in the reduction of inquiry to its sensible foundation, the situation of sensible subjectivity—namely, before a personal other who can respond or answer—also, as it were, appears and is rendered explicit. Language, when interpreted on the basis of sensibility, reveals sensible subjectivity as in relation not only to being, but to someone beyond being in the sense that she or he is not monstrated or *merely* an internal moment of being's monstration.

#### From Time-consciousness to Time-sense: Assessing the Import of the *Ur-Impression*

Turning now to the analysis of time, above, I had noted that, on Levinas's reading, sensibility posed special difficulties to Husserlian intentional analysis. Husserl's difficulties, on Levinas's account, derived from his tendency to retain a dipolar intentional structure that was typical of consciousness representing an object(s) to itself. This dipolar intentionality maintained the thinking consciousness as different from the being (and

from all being) that it held before itself in representation; yet it also maintained contemporaneity between conscious intention and *intentum*. Temporally speaking, the dipolar structure of representational intentionality is always a modification of the present of consciousness, so that a being can be present to it. Consciousness always retains and anticipates in a protention its objects: internal time-consciousness was this movement of protention and retention as modifying the present of consciousness.

In *Otherwise than being*, Levinas devotes several pages to Husserl's analysis of internal time-consciousness and sensibility (AE 39-43/OB 31-34), and to whether the temporality proper to representation and consciousness adequately describes the situation of subjectivity. Husserl's own analysis of the constitutive importance for consciousness of the *Ur-Impression* furnishes the warrant for Levinas's investigation of internal time-consciousness: for the *Ur-Impression* marks the moment when consciousness is reduced to its sensible situation. And in fact, Levinas finds that Husserl's attention to phenomena does not allow Husserl to overlook the uniqueness of the *Ur-Impression* and of its relationship to subjectivity.

Levinas, however, finds Husserl to be a prisoner of his own assumptions about the primacy of *consciousness* and of its corresponding dipolar intentionality: thus despite the fact that Husserl's remarks about the *Ur-Impression* ought to shatter the paradigm of intentionality appropriate to consciousness, while also upsetting the priority of consciousness, Husserl remains incapable of capitalizing on the discovery that the *Ur-Impression* neither develops, nor is an origin, nor conforms to the protention-retention

structure of time-*consciousness*, but suggests a wholly different temporal structure (AE 41-42/OB 32-33). Yet Levinas will take these discoveries, and the inconsistencies that surround them in Husserl's analyses, as the phenomenological warrant to develop a differently structured temporality that allows the phenomenological investigator to mark a difference in sensibility that fails to occur *within* essence.

On Levinas's reading, Husserlian internal time-consciousness maintains a contemporaneity of all its terms, which is what qualifies it as a synchronic temporal structure. Articulated as the present, synchronic time governs the mode in which the past and future unfold and signify. These latter times are retentions and protentions of the present, in which what has passed appears as past because present to consciousness, while the future is anticipated on the basis of the present (AE 40-41/OB 33). A synchronic temporal structure stretches out the present, so that it does not so much intrude into, as condition and determine the past and the future. This stretching-out of the present allows time to unfold as a continuum, composed of continual modifications of the present.

Levinas argues, however, that Husserl's own analysis of the *Ur-Impression*, which stands at the origin of the synchronic continuum and which links subjectivity's time to sensation, differs from other impressions. For the *Ur-Impression*, or the "living present" of subjectivity, cannot be anticipated: inasmuch as it constitutes the origin of subjectivity,<sup>33</sup> it does not modify an already constituted present, but establishes it. In this

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<sup>33</sup> Does subjectivity mean "consciousness" or "sensibility"? Levinas draws attention to the way in which it

sense, the *Ur-Impression* precedes its own possibility: it is “the ‘real’ preceding and surprising the possible” (AE 42/OB 33). Levinas stresses that the *Ur-Impression* marks, even for Husserl, an “absolute beginning” that does not emerge from a source by way of developing out of it (AE 41-42/OB 33);<sup>34</sup> rather, so far as the time of the subjectivity that begins with it is concerned, it happens spontaneously all in a singular instant (AE 41/OB 33). This is why Levinas calls the *Ur-Impression* a “today without yesterday or tomorrow” (AE 41/OB 33): the “living present” of the *Ur-Impression* is not a modification of consciousness (implying that consciousness is already constituted and could anticipate or retain the *Ur-Impression* on the basis of its being present to itself already), nor is it the correlate of intentional consciousness (hence it is also, in a sense, not the present—not “today” in the sense of an objectified present for consciousness). Absolutely unmodified by consciousness,<sup>35</sup> the *Ur-Impression* constitutes subjectivity—which remains consciousness despite the strangeness of the *Ur-Impression*, which defies all conscious intentionality and temporality.

“The proto-impression rediscovers in the context of intentionality (*which remains imperious with Husserl*), or after the Hegelian negation, its power to astonish [*étonner*]”

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means both at once: an impression is a sensible phenomenon, and affects sensibility; however, as he insistently points out, Husserl maintains (or seems to [*semble le dire*]) that in discussing the *Ur-Impression*, we are dealing with time-consciousness (AE 41-42/OB 33).

<sup>34</sup> See chapter two of the present work, pp. 75-76, on the nature of beginning, which necessarily cannot have or emerge from a past, nor have a future.

<sup>35</sup> Levinas quotes Husserl: “non-modified absolute, original source of all later being and consciousness”—[...] the proto-impression” (AE 41/OB 33).

(AE 42/OB 33): just because of the *Ur-impression*'s spontaneous beginning or originariness,<sup>36</sup> which defies the structures of time-consciousness all while always occurring in conjunction with subjectivity,<sup>37</sup> it marks an unexpected lapse of consciousness's synchronic temporality. Instead, the *Ur-Impression* in its relationship with subjectivity describes a temporalization that cannot be articulated as either retention or protention or the interplay of the two, which all occur as a modification of the present of consciousness. Time-consciousness or the temporality of *consciousness* cannot recover the originality of the *Ur-Impression* as a modification of its own present. The “I” of consciousness, and of all subjectivity comes after that which impresses itself on sensibility, and which “pre-originally” constitutes and identifies subjectivity as sensibility (or as sensitive) by moving it.

To try to clarify the notion of diachrony, one might think of diachrony and its role in my self-identification in terms which place Levinas near to psychoanalysis (though without claiming that he has an interest at this point in confronting that discipline's theories): I cannot, in memory, be present at the moment of my conception, and even at the moment of my birth, when I begin, I am who I am because of a past time that I was not present to experience, namely, the time of the womb, my mother's time and my father's time—their time together, when (one hopes) they loved me and sought for me

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<sup>36</sup> Levinas even notes that Husserl will call it, in his writings on inner time-consciousness, “originary creation” (AE 42/OB 33).

<sup>37</sup> As Levinas notes, Husserl insists that “the proto-impression does not *impress* itself [...] without consciousness” (AE 41/OB 33). His point, however, is that Husserl's restriction of subjectivity to consciousness in this instance is problematic, therefore I have used “subjectivity,” not “consciousness.”

before I was and before they could know me. I may in my own time fantasize about this past that has constituted my identity. I may be told about it by my parents or others whose time I also did not experience and cannot share as a modification of my present time into a memory that makes my past present to me again. Such pasts, however, do not constitute a memorial past *for me* (though for others, the time that constituted me is a memorial past, namely theirs). If diachrony as an irreducible difference of temporalization means anything,<sup>38</sup> then it means precisely the difference between a past I can recoup as memorial, as a modification of my being-present, and a past that (for me) is immemorial, and whose lived content I can only be told about, even though this immemorial time is absolutely responsible for my presence as an original and originary sensible subjectivity. Originally, I am not time-consciousness but, thanks to the motivation of the *Ur-Impression*, time-sense.

### **The Self as Sensibility Reconsidered**

The diachronic structure articulated between sensibility and the *Ur-Impression* presents us with a paradox: it allows us to articulate a difference between the other and myself, by which I can be identified as an origin only because my originality is constituted by a *pre*-original contact. This pre-original contact comes from an alterity that my sensibility as such cannot anticipate or recuperate, and whose sense is not constituted

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<sup>38</sup> I do not mean to say that diachrony can *only* mean the difference between memorial and immemorial tasks—the ethical significance of diachrony has not been addressed, but I do not mean to exclude it, only to clarify the notion of a dia-chronic temporal structure that could reasonably be understood as a difference within Saying that is irreducible to the amphibology between being and a being, between verb and noun in a participial-like grammar of relationships.

by me. This pre-original alterity contacts me, and this contact with me—felt in my first feeling—moves me to be as original and identified, facilitating my self-identification with elemental being. My identity as self-identification is compromised thereby, if one assumes that self-identification is the work of a self-constituting subjectivity, i.e., is my own *Sinngebung*.

The diachrony that Levinas elicits from his analysis of the *Ur-Impression* in relation to my sensibility reveals that I am subjectivated by a motivation that accomplishes me as moving before I am consciousness and a striving to be myself. This means that I am, as Levinas puts it, “late [*en retard*] to [my] present, incapable of recuperating this delay [*retard*]” (AE 128/OB 101), for I cannot constitute the motivator of the *Ur-Impression* as a memorial past for myself. The delayed<sup>39</sup> accomplishment of subjectivity to its own present generates a new account of the self as “recurrence” (AE 130-144/OB 102-113), in which the self is constituted by its continually arriving late to its own present and identity, and its being thrown back on the pre-original other to whom subjectivity owes its being-a-self.

The fact that diachrony occurs in the relation of me with an *Ur-Impression* (the relationship that describes my original constitution as subjectivity) implicates diachrony structurally with sensibility; at the same time, as we have seen in Levinas's reading of Husserl's late fragments on kinesthesia and the kinesthetic self, sensibility implied a time lag between movement and motivator within the relationship of *motivation* (from which

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<sup>39</sup> Delayed with respect to the time of the motivator of the *Ur-Impression*.



objectivating intentionality issued). Time and sensibility show a mutual foundation in each other that is characteristic of transcendental constitution, which Levinas had identified as one of Husserlian phenomenology's key retrievals, as we saw in chapter three of the present work.

In this transcendental constitution of sensibility and temporality,<sup>40</sup> *that* the other *moves* me, which is to say relates to me insofar as I am sensibility, the other whose alterity manifests as always irrecoverably prior to my original and “living present,” is nevertheless also “in me.” That is, the other's 'touch' is felt,<sup>41</sup> for that which is felt manifests in my feeling, and feeling by its very structure is never *outside* of me, for it is felt in my flesh.<sup>42</sup> But although the other is, in this fashion, in the self, the other is not in

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<sup>40</sup> I.e., of subjectivity *as* temporalized sensibility or sensitive temporality, to try to respect the specific, transcendental, and non-dipolar structure of the subjectivity–*Ur-Impression* relationship.

<sup>41</sup> This “touch” need not be physical contact. Levinas speaks of the other's proximity as a coming ever nearer, as an approach (AE 104/OB 82-83), implying that the other is not necessarily physically touching me *yet*, and that therefore contact is not to be interpreted as a pure physics. The face-to-face relationship described in *Totality and Infinity* also supports such a reading, for the other affects me without necessarily physically touching me, although the other's face affects my sensibility. One might also adduce the elegant testimony of Simone Weil in her brief phenomenology in *'Iliad' or the poem of force* of the way that proximity is felt at a distance as a socially constituted and significant space: “The human beings around us, by their presence alone, have a power to modify each of the movements that our body traces out; a passer-by does not turn our course through a street in the same manner that a sign does, one does not stand up, walk, sit down in one's room in the same way when one is alone as when one has a visitor” (Weil 22/48). See Simone Weil, *'Iliad' or the poem of force: a critical edition*, ed. and trans. James P. Holoka (New York: Peter Lang, 2003).

<sup>42</sup> To distinguish emotion, such as disappointment, from sensation, such as cold, in order to characterize the former as less “physical” or bodily than the latter, or as having interior versus exterior motivation, seems to me an inapt distinction: who does not know intimately that disappointment manifests as a whole range of physical or bodily sensations, or that it attaches me to a situation beyond the apparent privacy of my bodily or even mental bounds?

the self like a thought is in consciousness<sup>43</sup>: the thought in consciousness is a given received actively by consciousness's thinking (AE 111/OB 87), and which must appear relative to the anticipatory immobility<sup>44</sup> of consciousness; by contrast, sensibility is “incapable of thinking that which 'touches' it” (AE 128/OB 101).<sup>45</sup> Sensibility is always set in motion before sensibility can receive that which motivates it, and “the influence [*emprise*] of the Other [*Autre*] is exerted on the Same to the point of interrupting it, of leaving it without speech [*parole*]” (AE 128/OB 101);<sup>46</sup> by contrast, the conscious, thinking subjectivity is always anticipating and retaining its object, and so is never interrupted by it.<sup>47</sup> But subjectivity is properly both consciousness and sensibility, each mode constituted in the end as spurred and constituted by the interruptions or

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<sup>43</sup> As in *Totality and Infinity*, so in *Otherwise than being*: consciousness is defined in several ways, depending upon which passages of Husserl (or other thinkers) Levinas may be (implicitly or explicitly) addressing, and depending on the needs of his own analysis. Consciousness in *Otherwise than being* can mean “knowledge of oneself by oneself” [*savoir de soi par soi*] (AE 130/OB 102), as “the identity of an ego [*un moi*] endowed with knowledge or (which amounts to the same thing) with powers” (AE 104/OB 83), or with the activity of “reception of the given” (AE 111/OB 87), or as “the equality” with “a visible or conceivable object” (AE 111/OB 87). The equivalency between knowledge and power, which are characterized as relationships of consciousness, is, of course, one of Levinas's major contentions concerning the nature of consciousness as neither reducible to simple neutrality, nor as giving the original sense of non-violence or (said in a positive formulation) peaceableness.

<sup>44</sup> See IM 139-140/IaM 124-125 on the immobility of consciousness. Levinas also uses this language on occasion in *Otherwise than being*: e.g., speaking of the incoherence of the discourse of responsibility, he asks: “But does the coherence that would be missing from this discourse consist in the immobility of the instant of the truth [...]?” (AE 190/OB 155-156)

<sup>45</sup> Concerning the quotation marks around “touch” in this claim, see note 41 above.

<sup>46</sup> The silencing of speech, associated with the interruption of the Sameness or self-identification of subjectivity, suggests that here, speech is being considered as a power-ontological, voluntarist, designatory phenomenon, i.e., the Said.

<sup>47</sup> See chapter three, p. 131.

interventions of the 'touch' and time of the pre-original other.

The difference, however, between subjectivity as consciousness and subjectivity as sensibility gives subjectivity its peculiar structural dynamic.<sup>48</sup> Subjectivity is structured as a pulsative or diastolic-systolic movement (AE 138/OB 109), whose motivation comes from an alterity felt in my skin and yet beyond my grasp.<sup>49</sup> The subject structured by this diachronic temporality, which can rob subjectivity of speech in the very moment that it constitutes subjectivity as consciousness, is continually moved and moving: as motivated, its motivation continually “recurs” (AE 130/OB 102-103), and this recurrent motivation manifests as the felt difference between consciousness and sensibility.<sup>50</sup> Sensitive subjectivity gives rise to consciousness, which establishes itself only to have its ground pulled out from under it by the other, who affects its sensibility (and so unsettles its consciousness) in ways unanticipated because unanticipatable, and

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<sup>48</sup> One might be tempted at this moment to qualify that dynamic as a “unity in this difference,” but it is unclear that Levinas would accept such a formulation. He does say that the subject structured by this difference “does not bear its identity like beings [*étants*] bear it, identical as saids without retraction [*dits sans dédit*] and which, thus, are thematized and appear to consciousness” (AE 132/OB 104). Thus he is suggesting another sense or structure of identity, one that takes back in some fashion the usual philosophical understanding of identity. Levinas wishes to emphasize the conceptual *in*-coherence of subjectivity, or its disunity, perhaps inasmuch as sensibility feels primarily the difference between itself and the Other, and so between its sensibility and its self-conception. Only in responsibility for the other does the unity of subjectivity manifest itself in feeling: namely, the feeling of having uniquely to support the other and the others, of having to mobilize all one's resources, of being uniquely responsible despite (or rather because of) one's failure to achieve self-coherence in the movement of identification.

<sup>49</sup> Beyond either the grasp of consciousness or of power, inasmuch as these are to render the grasped adequate to my intentions.

<sup>50</sup> One might object: surely it is manifest in the feeling of responsibility, of being-for-the-other? In answer, I ask for a suspension of judgment on this point, since nothing yet has come to the fore that would definitively and phenomenologically identify the motivator of the *Ur-Impression* as personal alterity rather than an element—the fact that I cannot remember the motivator of this originary motivation is, in fact, its chief and essential characteristic.

unretained because pre-original and so never present to be subsequently *re*-presented. Subjectivity then rises once more to consciousness and finds itself once again expelled from consciousness by an impression not originating within my time, in a movement which Levinas baptizes with the name “recurrence” (AE 130/OB 102).<sup>51</sup>

It is necessary to be fairly precise here in grasping the notion of recurrence, lest we misunderstand recurrent subjectivity to be a kind of ecstatic phenomenon because of its dependency on a pre-original motivator whose touch motivates it. Levinas situates his investigation into the “positive signification” of recurrence, i.e., subjectivity's failure to remain consciousness in relation to being, as an objection to a general philosophico-critical trend in the deconstruction of the notion of “the subject.” Claiming that idealism<sup>52</sup> traditionally teaches that subject and consciousness are equivalents for each other, Levinas charges idealism with failing even to suspect “the *who* or the *one*” as the foundations of the traditional definition of subjectivity as consciousness (AE 130/OB

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<sup>51</sup> The structural parallel between the movement of subjectivity as motivated by the pre-original motivator of a motivation and the internal dynamic of the Said, in which being and a being, verb and noun, are amphibolous with respect to each other, is clear.

<sup>52</sup> Levinas gives no qualification of this term, but one infers from the unfolding of the analysis that in this instance, he includes the line of post-Hegelian thinkers up to and including Sartre who have taken the dialectic of substance and subject, being and thought, as a process that establishes the subject as self-consciousness (AE 131/OB 103). Although Hegel's philosophy does not stop at self-consciousness, but continues on to develop into understanding and various forms of reason, ending in absolute spirit, Levinas seems to think that nevertheless, the crucial relational structure of self-consciousness, the “for itself” is preserved and active throughout: hence, “for Hegel, the Oneself [*Soi-même*] is posited based on the *for itself*” (AE 131/OB 103). This shows that Hegel is committed to denouncing the reification of an “in itself” by placing it always in relation to an abstract “for itself”: the for-itself is the abstract “I” to whom being in all its forms appears in order that the “I” be, and suggests that Levinas reads Hegel's de-reification of subjectivity as capable only of denouncing a substance-ontology, but that his investigation of the “in itself” is incomplete and must remain so in the face of Hegel's fixation on the for-itself relationship.

103). Nevertheless, he does not agree<sup>53</sup> with the way in which many modern and then-contemporary philosophers, from Hegel to Sartre (AE 131/OB 103-104), had diagnosed this failure. As Levinas reads them, *their* reading of idealism's equivalency between subject and consciousness charges idealism with failure because such an equivalency reifies consciousness *into* subjectivity (which would be a substance), and disguises the relational character of consciousness *different from subjectivity* (AE 130/OB 102-103): namely, the “*for oneself* of consciousness” (AE 130/OB 103).

If such critique ended by acknowledging that this is only one aspect of the problematic identification of subjectivity with consciousness, Levinas might have few qualms about embracing it; however, to the degree that the “*who* or the *one*” is “a non-relation, but absolutely a term” signified by “an irreversible assignation,” he disagrees with certain trends of contemporary philosophy over the idea that the rejection of substance ontology implies the rejection of the notion of a term (i.e., of a subject) that is “in itself” (AE 130/OB 103).<sup>54</sup> It does, however, require that we pose the question: what

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<sup>53</sup> Or else, he does not *simply* agree with them: as in *Totality and Infinity*, where Hegel's description of the dialectic of self-consciousness is taken as substantially correct as a description of the very mode of subjectivity's self-identification, in *Otherwise than being*, Levinas does not object to the notion that consciousness is a relationship that is *for itself* (this is what he assumes in describing subjectivity as a *conatus essendi*, a striving to be itself). His objection to the reduction of subjectivity to relationship—a reduction initiated by Hegel and continued by Sartre and other neo-Hegelians—lies elsewhere.

<sup>54</sup> Levinas allows for the possibility that “the outdated notion of the soul” (AE 130/OB 103) might be evidence that idealism's traditional canon of doctrines and concepts *does* in fact go beyond substance ontology in its conflation of consciousness and subject and development of the notion of an “in-itself.” Of note, too, is that in Levinas's fatal ontology, the in-itself was also recouped from “ecstaticist” accounts of subjectivity, yet the in-itself was not the subject of an irreversible assignation. The positioning, however, of subjectivity that ruptured (in and for an instant) the reign of pure, *il y a*tic presence, and this hypostatic subjectivity, characterized by hypostatic solitude, received no explanation due to a lack of “physics in metaphysics.”

phenomenon (or quasi-phenomenon) results in the development of the (distorted or dissimulated) notion of an “in itself” in the teachings of idealism?

Levinas's answer, in one word, which he furnishes himself, is “incarnation” (AE 139/OB 109). In order to understand what he means by this, we must return again to the difference *of* subjectivity, in its modes as sensibility and consciousness.<sup>55</sup> Incarnation or life as an animated body does not signify a dualism of body and soul (AE 132/OB 104):<sup>56</sup> incarnation and its vicissitudes do not imply a soul trying to escape a body, or trapped within it, while both body and soul would already be fully constituted and identifiable. The sense of the “in itself” is itself relational *and kinesthetic*: it is accomplished by the irreversible assignation of a term, which Levinas explicates as a position that is accomplished

under the influence of an [...] expulsion out of being, into oneself; an expulsion in that it assigns me before I can show myself, before I can install myself: I am assigned without recourse, without homeland, already sent back to myself, but without power to hold myself there: subjected [*astreint*] before beginning (AE 131/OB 103).

The “in itself” is a position that I do not actively accomplish, but to which I am “sent”

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<sup>55</sup> The difference between sensibility and consciousness has already been mentioned several times, but it perhaps bears mentioning that difference need not mean “opposed to each other”: we should recall that in *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas clearly and in more than one place denied that consciousness and sensibility could be understood as opposite each other. He further claimed that such a misunderstanding of the relationship between them could only result from abstraction, itself a mode of consciousness's functioning and signifying differently from the way in which sensibility signified and functioned, but which served in fact to express the intensification of the power and originality of the subject in its independence from the element on which it nevertheless also depended. See chapter four of the present work. There is no indication in *Otherwise than being* that Levinas has abandoned this position concerning the characterization of the relationship that holds between subjectivity's different modes.

<sup>56</sup> See also TeI 139-142/TI 165-168 on this point.

inasmuch as I am not the constituting pole of an intention, but am in the position of the constituted. My body *is* my position, where and how I am before I could show myself or appear in being to myself (this clearly is a way of expressing the for-itself structure of consciousness, to which Levinas contrasts the in-itself position of a motivated or animated body).

Levinas's phrasing is unfortunately confusing, because it *does* suggest an “I” on the one hand, and a body on the other, to which the I must go under compulsion. This is not quite correct, however: I am made to be *by parental others* as a body, and can only arise “there”; but to be a body is not originally to experience oneself as a coherent, determinate subject.<sup>57</sup> Sensibility is not reflective, nor an original for-itself, nor, Levinas contends—and this is crucial—can it be originally a relationship with being or *of* being.<sup>58</sup> If being is structured by the conditions that permit monstration, if monstration is the function of being just because being is essence (i.e., ontological difference), and if one of these conditions is subjectivity that kerygmatically allows being to appear, my sensibility does not immediately signify as placing me as a moment of ontological difference or in relation to it. I am passive with respect to my being bodily, and so unable *first* to establish myself in relation to being, or to appear to myself in a for-itself structure (as self-

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<sup>57</sup> Without suggesting that Levinas's work has the same basis as psychoanalytic theory, one might take as a helpful illustration of the initial incoherence of bodily being the analysis of the infantile body that Lacan provides in his well-known essay, “The Mirror Stage” (1949). Only when the infant can see itself in a mirror (when the infant is literally reflected back to itself) and realize that the whole and coherent image presented corresponds to the sensuous but uncoordinated drives it feels does a “for-itself”-like subjective position that could be called rudimentary self-consciousness even arise.

<sup>58</sup> That is to say, sensibility does not originally articulate ontological difference.

consciousness), thanks to the fact that I was, in a sense, the subject of assignation not from the first, but prior to my being at all.<sup>59</sup>

What demonstrates, as it were, the non-priority of consciousness is the “anxiety” [*inquietude*] of my incarnate being. Consciousness in relation to being differentiates and intends, and is “serene” in relation to the beings it monstres; the assigned subjectivity, an incarnation, is “unquiet.” It has “its back to the wall,” is “racked [*tordu*] in its skin, ill in its skin” because its subjectivation as a body necessarily bears the trace of the pre-original relationship that assigned it to incarnation as to a destiny (AE 132/OB 104).<sup>60</sup> In relation to this destining assignation, subjectivity is as “absolute passivity,” and “in this sense, a victim of a persecution paralyzing every assumption that could awaken in it [*lui*] in order to posit it *for* itself [*soi*], passivity of the attachment already knotted as irreversibly past, to one side of every memory [...]” (AE 133/OB 104). One might protest the extreme images of suffering persecution, of being racked, ill in one's skin, etc., as exaggerated;<sup>61</sup> I feel no need to defend Levinas from such criticism, but it is important to

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<sup>59</sup> Again, one thinks of the situation in which I arise as a body: especially given Levinas's analyses of fecundity, it is not unreasonable to consider the relationship that a child has to its parents. Before the child is, she or he is intended by parents: even if the parents take steps *not* to have a child, they intend a child who does not yet exist, but whom they assign to a body whose coming to be is not wholly within their power, either.

<sup>60</sup> “The discovery of the being to itself [*à lui-même*] coils up there [in the oneself (*soi-même*)]; without which *essence* exonerated from itself, constituted in immanent time, will only posit indiscernible points; together, certainly, but neither thwarting nor accomplishing any destiny” (AE 133/OB 105). This is clearly a hypothetical scenario, but the basic point to draw out here is that without incarnation, there would be no destiny for being, and so the task or hope or possibility of thwarting destiny likewise would not arise.

<sup>61</sup> One might especially contest such claims in light of Levinas's appropriation of the maternal body bearing a child within (AE 132/OB 104): to bear a child is difficult, and does involve suffering, but it is *not* a persecution, nor is the mother victimized by pregnancy, nor is she “absolutely passive” with respect to



the analysis that once again, suffering signifies: this time, however, suffering does not signify the evil of being, but my responsibility assigned by pre-original alterity (AE 134/OB 105).<sup>62</sup> Thus the recurrent “in itself” that I am as sensibility is *one*—but not as a definite, determinate unity so much as a *uniqueness* [*cette unité ou cette unicité*] that my assignation by pre-original alterity constitutes (AE 134/OB 106).

Thanks to the assignatory relationship which pre-original alterity opens with me, I am an “in itself,” as uniquely assigned and “identified,”<sup>63</sup> and this relationship with pre-original alterity, as we have seen, necessitates that I be a body. Subjectivity is (first of all) sensibility *distinct* from consciousness. Moreover, this distinction recurs, and the

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becoming pregnant or bearing a child. A much more nuanced approach would be needed to align passivity with suffering and with the chanciness of engendering a child to make half of Levinas's language fit the metaphor he so loves; but I do not see a way to recuperate the idea that in general, pregnancy is a bearing of the other like a bearing of persecution by the other.

<sup>62</sup> Sensibility's terms, as Levinas notes, are enjoyment and wounding [*jouissance et blessure*] (AE 79/OB 62-63). When Levinas introduces these terms, it is unclear who or what wounds, or whether the wounding indicated in the phrase is equivalent to the painfulness of need or some other painfulness. To the degree that Levinas emphasizes that painfulness (no qualification given at all) signifies on the basis of enjoyment as positive pleasure (e.g., AE 80-81, 92/OB 63-65, 73), it would seem that he repeats a portion of his analysis in *Totality and Infinity*, and that the painfulness he means in such instances is the painfulness associated with need. However, to the degree that he, without transition or warning, goes on to speak of the wounding and painfulness that constitutes the personal other's relationship with me (e.g., AE 81, 93/OB 64, 74), it is difficult to see how this wounding could signify on the basis of positive pleasure without also saying that my pleasure signifies and has a sense prior to my relationship with the other. This state of affairs, in which my positive pleasure has priority over painfulness, is consistent with the prioritization of the future which had emerged from the fatal ontology, but it is not clear that Levinas's mature analyses could sustain the posteriority of painfulness. Unfortunately, Levinas never gives a clear analysis of the relationship of the painfulness attending need and the painfulness that comes from the personal other who assigns me uniquely to a position and responsibility (and I have found only one, undeveloped instance in which he seems to say that I *enjoy* by the other, as well as suffer by the other [AE 114/OB 90]). This lacuna constitutes a major point of instability in Levinas's work, and a source of confusion for readers that not even the anteriority of the posterior alleviates.

<sup>63</sup> Not, however, because of the designatory intention that I maintain with beings in their being: for my relationship with beings in their being depends already upon my assignation.

recurrence of the “in itself,” which, despite significant similarities, is *not* equivalent here to hypostasis as Levinas had described it in the fatal ontology:

Prior to the game of being [*en deçà du jeu de l'être*], prior to the present, older than the time of consciousness accessible in memory [...] the oneself [*soi-même*] is exposed as a hypostasis to which the being [*l'être*] that it is as a being [*étant*] is only a mask. It bears its name as a borrowed name, as a pseudonym or pronoun. In itself, the oneself is the one or the unique separated from being (AE 134-135/OB 106).

Hypostasis in *Otherwise than being* is *masked* by being, and the name of the subject that appears—the name or noun that is Said—dissimulates the assignation that now constitutes hypostasis, not as an original event of being but as an original response-to—*cum*—responsibility-for pre-original alterity. Hypostasis is a separation from being, on Levinas's analysis, but this separation does not establish only the fatal ontology, but assigns me to be as *responsible to* and *thanks to* pre-original alterity.

Hypostasis, the bodily sensibility that I am, establishes the nature of the “in itself” that recurs despite efforts to render the for-itself the basis of a non-reified consciousness. The notion of hypostasis attempts to redeem or retrieve the insight of philosophies that accept the notion of a soul, but (in keeping with contemporary sensibilities) without accepting a substance ontology. In so doing, Levinas does not deny that there is consciousness, or that there is a “for-itself” relationship that distinguishes consciousness from a substance; but he also does not eliminate the need to think subjectivity as different from consciousness precisely insofar as the term “subject” has been thought of as an “in itself.” On his analysis, the sense of the “in itself” must change to signify the assignatory

relationship, articulated diachronically between myself-as-bodily and pre-original alterity. The “in itself” signifies in a phenomenologically warranted fashion as that diachronic assignation of me by the other. The movement of subjectivity as “for itself” does occur—it is not an error to consider subjectivity as for-itself, particularly if one is considering subjectivity in the mode of consciousness, but the for-itself relationship is not absolute, nor does it exhaust the sense of subjectivity: the in-itself recurs, and recurs in such a way as to signify the lateness of consciousness to subjectivity's identity (i.e., it recurs as uniqueness, on the basis of which ontological modes of identification depend). The in-itself is already an in-itself-*for-the-other*.

At this point in the analysis, an obvious question arises: if I “am” assigned as “in myself,” and so already beholden to pre-original alterity for my unique identity prior to my being “for myself” as either consciousness or *conatus essendi* (“identity before [*avant*] the ‘for itself’” [AE 135/OB 106]),<sup>64</sup> why am I consciousness *at all*? What in my assignation by pre-original alterity motivates me to conscious intentionality, to the constitution of ontological difference and monstration? What spurs me to designate beings and bring them to light in the truth?

### Being Reconsidered

The account of recurrence, which we have just come from reviewing, remains

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<sup>64</sup> Again, Levinas uses identity sometimes in an extremely technical fashion which restricts identity to the mode of being that is “for itself” as consciousness and/or as *conatus essendi* (a distinction which, on Levinas's reading, amounts to the same thing, namely the Same as an ontological function), and it is on the basis of such a technical restriction that subjectivity is sometimes said to have no identity. At other points, however, he does not employ it nearly so technically, as in this case.

similar to Levinas's earlier accounts of the self-other [*autrui*] relationship in this respect: that the sense of the relationship originates from you and intends me. My self [*soi*] as recurring and responsible signifies a one-way [*sens unique*] responsibility to you, who are pre-original to me. This diachronic difference, which we can translate into the linguistic register of Levinas's analysis as a difference proper to Saying, constitutes the *signifying* amphibology of Saying, by which a relationship transcending relations of being is sustained. "Saying" can mean a term within the ontological difference of the Said: saying can designate a verb passing into a noun, or dissolving the noun's definition, as we saw earlier. "Saying," however, can *also* mean the difference between you and me, articulated temporally, sensibly, and now linguistically as your appeal to or invocation of me, and my *responding* to you in an irrepressible, unsurpassable answering.<sup>65</sup>

If, however, there were no more to be said concerning the Saying in its ethical difference than this, consciousness would remain mysterious, or else, it would, if we understood it to be involved in the differentiation of being into verb and noun beyond the good, and its motivation would remain unexamined. Given, however, that responsibility is goodness and transcendence of ontological difference, then had Levinas said no more than this concerning the difference in Saying between me and pre-original alterity, one might well conclude that being signified as evil, and that its motivation and sense could only be self-centered.

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<sup>65</sup> The *content* of such saying, the said of my saying or your saying, may be literally anything, from words to gestures to a look, to a simple being nearby, but whatever is said, I say it to you or you say it me, and open the "space" of signification, which Levinas calls "proximity." See pp. 248-249 below.

The advent of the third party, however, an other other whom Levinas, following a Biblical quote, describes as “the one far off” (AE 200/OB 157), causes a “contradiction” within the ethical difference proper to Saying as a non-ontological difference: “The third introduces a contradiction in the Saying whose signification before [*devant*] the other [*autre*] was going, right up to that moment, in a single direction [*dans un sens unique*]” (AE 200/OB 157).<sup>66</sup> The third is an other other to me, *as well as* an other to the other (AE 200/OB 157), and signifies the multiplicity of alterity (in a sense, no matter how many other others there are, they are all structurally “third,” for they present the same difficulty vis-à-vis my relationship to the proximate or nearest other). That is, the difference of Saying is not simply singular, but there are multiple differences that do not harmonize with each other.<sup>67</sup>

This contradiction within the Saying, in which my one-way responsibility is put in question by the multiple others who inspire me absolutely to responsible motion and

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<sup>66</sup> It is nevertheless not *wholly* clear that the direction of signification actually changes, since the sense of justice (in which I deal with the thirds in relation to the second and vice versa, and even in relation to me [AE 200-201/OB 157-158]), remains dependent on the face to face relationship, which is never suspended or overcome.

<sup>67</sup> Levinas's choice of the word “contradiction” to describe the differences that ambiguously constitute Saying is interesting, if problematic: a contradiction requires synchronicity, if not perhaps in the Aristotelian sense, certainly in the Levinasian sense of synchronic time, which is necessarily broad enough to include Hegelian dialectical time. If the multiplicity of others and their inspiration of me is contradictory, is this because my time is always in some sense present? How is Levinas able to say that the other and the third are my neighbor, who are “contemporaries with each other” (AE 200/OB 157)? Precisely what does that mean? Does it mean that as soon as there is another, there is consciousness, which necessarily thinks in terms of contemporaneity? Or does it mean that pre-original motivations, in the unrecoverability of their past, are contemporaneous with respect to each other for me, who cannot say more than that I cannot recuperate their time? Further evidence that a fine-grained distinguishing of different pre-original alterities remains an outstanding task for Levinas's work.

selfhood without being directly comparable to each other (AE 201/OB 158), would paralyze me if I had no recourse to consciousness and being: “The entry of the third is the very fact of consciousness, of a gathering in *being* [*en être*] [...]” (AE 201/OB 158). The relationship between me and one other was without question or problem, Levinas claims (AE 200-201/OB 157), because there was no limit on my responsibility to the other (AE 200/OB 157).<sup>68</sup> I am, in other words, responsible before I can think, before I have time to be troubled by inconsistency or possibilities. The arrival of the third, however, as ‘farther’ than the other,<sup>69</sup> is the advent of both problem and solution in one stroke. The problem is the need to determine how I can meet obligations that, though absolutely incumbent upon me, do not harmonize,<sup>70</sup> and so cannot all be fulfilled. The solution is consciousness as a relationship *with being*, in which the incomparable others can be compared (AE 201, 202/OB 158), and yet this relationship with being is motivated by the touch of the other in whom the other others also “enter” into proximity with me.

A note of caution is in order: the recourse to consciousness and being does not mean that the recurrent self [*soi*], confronted with this dilemma of sensibility-*cum*-

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<sup>68</sup> Quite evidently, this is true only if my obligation to you does not reveal any obligations to myself. That the Levinasian self is undignified before the other, and can have no obligations to itself in the facing relationship, is a theme that has given rise to much consternation and criticism: see, for example, Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” 137; Bautista and Peperzak, “Unspoken Unity”; and Hilary Putnam, “Levinas and Judaism” in *Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, eds. Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 56-57.

<sup>69</sup> Though “the one far off” nevertheless is still one near [*prochain*] to me, is still in “proximity” to me, i.e., obligating me by affecting my sensibility.

<sup>70</sup> Nor do they coordinate, mitigate, or invalidate each other.

responsibility, subsequently decides to become consciousness and maintain relationships of ontological difference. As soon as there comes a third, there is consciousness effectuating the truth of being. Levinas refuses any empiricist reading of the notion of “the entry of the third”:

It is not that the entry of the third is an empirical fact and that my responsibility for the other is compelled by the 'force of things' to a calculus. In the proximity of the other, all the others than the other obsess me and already the obsession cries justice, reclaims measure and knowing, is consciousness (AE 201/OB 158).

Levinas describes proximity as the relationship of the approach of the other to me, by which I am assigned a position and responsibility.<sup>71</sup> In proximity (i.e., my assignment by the other that comes simply from the other's approaching me), I am in relation to the third(s). Granted, Levinas's efforts to describe the “entry of the third” engenders many difficult questions about how I could feel, in the face of the other who confronts me, *all* the other others as different from this one other before me;<sup>72</sup> the overall thrust, however, of Levinas's effort to articulate the significance of the third is clear: if responsibility for

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<sup>71</sup> “Proximity is the subject who approaches and who consequently constitutes a relation in which I participate as a term, but where I am more—or less—than a term. This surplus or this fault [*défaut*] rejects me outside of the objectivity of the relation” (AE 103-104/OB 82) and renders me inconsistent (“I am a term irreducible to the relation and yet in recurrence, which empties me of every consistency” [AE 104/OB 82]). Although “subject” ordinarily only applied to me, given that it has *always* been the other who touched me before I could anticipate him or her, this claim can only be consistent with the major thrust of Levinas's development of difference other than ontological if “subject” in this sentence refers to the other.

<sup>72</sup> How, in other words, does the face of the other also signify a multiplicity of *non-ideal* others? The answer to this question cannot be that I reflect on the other and deduce that she or he must have come from other others, etc. Nor is it clear that Levinas could say that the other is substituted for his or her others, and bears a trace of them: this seems as though it would require a symmetrical account of my subjection to the other as a substitution for him or her, and the other's position. On the difficulties inhering in the notion of substitution itself, see Robert Bernasconi, “What is the question to which 'substitution' is the answer?,” *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, eds. Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 234-251.

*one* other is unproblematically goodness, the one other's subjectivation of me also and immediately subjects me to responsibility for all the other others, which subjection to all the other others is called "justice."<sup>73</sup>

Justice is a complicated relation of relations: it motivates consciousness and being, gives these (quasi-)phenomena their proper sense, and founds them on the relationship of (1) the other to me, of (2) the other to the others, of (3) the others to the other, and of (4) the others to me in the face of the other (AE 200/OB 157). Nor will just any mode of relationship and priority among all these relationships be dignified with the name "justice": Levinas writes that "justice only remains justice in a society where there is no distinction between those close and those far away, but where the impossibility to pass to one side of the nearest one also remains" (AE 203/OB 159). That is to say, I am responsible for the ones far off *just because* I respond to my fellow [*prochain*].<sup>74</sup> If I do not respond to the other in responding to the others, but attempt to "pass to one side" of him or her, or to leave him or her out of consideration, then whatever I may accomplish in relation to the "ones far off," for their sake, is not justice. If, as Levinas claims, "[t]he foundation of consciousness is justice" (AE 204/OB 160), since consciousness correlates with being and constitutes the ontological difference required to compare sensible incomparables, then to pass by the one near me without consideration in order only to

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<sup>73</sup> "All the others [*autres*] who obsess me in the other [*autrui*] [...] *immediately* [*d'emblée*] concern me" (AE 202/OB 159).

<sup>74</sup> "My relation with the personal other [*autrui*] as my fellow [*prochain*] gives sense to my relations with all the others. [...] Justice is impossible unless the one who renders it is himself in proximity" (AE 202/OB 159).



serve the ones far off is a perversion of consciousness. It would, however, likewise be a perversion of the sense of being, and a violation of justice to serve the one near me and not consider those far off. I am, as sensibility, vulnerable to all the others, both near and far, and responsible for them, and my responsibility results in the demand that I realize justice for all the others.

Thus, “vulnerability [...] contains the motivation of [...] cognitive function,” Levinas writes (AE 80/OB 64). Vulnerability is not separable from sensibility. That I am sensibility, not freedom or consciousness *first*, means that I am unavoidably vulnerable to the other and the others: not because of some lapse in my defenses, but because sensibility in its immediate responsivity-*cum*-responsibility is intrinsically vulnerability. For sensibility responds to motivations that constitute me pre-originally, which, as we saw earlier, means that they precede their own possibility. This is to say that I do not have time to take a distance from them and from the motivators of the motivation; the motivations of the others are upon me before I can anticipate. The others, related diachronically to me, affect and alter me before I can erect any defense or barrier.

Consciousness, which seeks to monstrate truth, i.e., to know, differs from sensibility in that to know, the “unveiling [*découverte*] of being to itself—marks a rupture with the immediate and in a certain sense an abstraction” (AE 80-81/OB 64). It signifies a stance in which I have time, or can respond as if the relation with the other were not upon me already, and thereby I can calculate, think, decide, and even defend myself.<sup>75</sup> The

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<sup>75</sup> See the discussion of this point in relation to living on... in the preceding chapter, p. 185-186.

rupture of concrete sensibility that consciousness marks, however, is not first of all in service to my self-defense,<sup>76</sup> but, as we have seen, to the problem that vulnerable sensibility is posed by incomparable pre-original contacts: because of this service to the demands of the multiplicity of pre-original alterities who contact me, consciousness is for the others and the other.

If consciousness, which necessarily participates in effecting being as ontological difference, has its sense in my relationship with the multiplicity of pre-original alterities whose differences from each other are incomparable, then can being remain simply indifferent to ethical difference? In the 1930s and 1940s, the relationship with being was original and subjectivity was constituted and defined by relation to being immediately and independently of any relationship to the other;<sup>77</sup> yet Levinas had already begun to shift his position in the 1950s, inspired by his readings of Husserl's work on sensibility. Beginning with analyses of sensibility that had been informed by Husserlian kinesthesia allowed Levinas to begin to explore the relationship with the other as being at least as primordial as my relationship with the elements.

*Otherwise than being* represents a further development of this shift away from locating the sense of being in the priority of the self's ontological constitution. Granted ontology is original, ontology itself is motivated *pre-originally*, by the diachronic

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<sup>76</sup> I.e., to my for-myself as an end in itself.

<sup>77</sup> Levinas had not yet developed the notion of the pre-original in relation to alterity, by which to circumvent the significance of the originality of subjectivity's relationship with being.

relationship in which the other “inspires” me (AE 181-183/OB 142-144), moves me before I am a participant in the monstration of being and before my being signifies the accomplishment of ontological difference. In developing the notion of the pre-original, Levinas not only renders relative the priority of originality, he not only transforms the sense of the subject, he transforms the sense of being: being is no longer *simply* that which generates the problem to which the face of the other as a relationship of non-indifference responds. Being signifies now as an absolutely necessary moment of my response to a problem that the plurality of faces, of interpersonal differences (as opposed to the singular and monolithic ontological difference), poses: “[i]t is not by hazard nor by stupidity [*niaiserie*] nor by a usurpation that the order of truth and essence [...] is at the first rank of western philosophy. [...] It is necessary [...] to follow in signification or in proximity or in the *Saying* the latent birth [...] of essence, of the Said [...] in responsibility” (AE 199-200/OB 157). Only ontological difference, which makes possible “coexistence, contemporaneity, gathering, order, thematization, the *visibility* of visages, and thereby the intentionality and intellect, and in intentionality and the intellect, the intelligibility of the system and, thereby, also a co-presence on one equal footing [*un pied d'égalité*] as before a court of justice” (AE 200/OB 157), can respond to the anarchy of pre-original social difference. For this reason, its sense is justice, for it is itself the first “work,” as it were, of justice.

The radicality of this claim concerning the sense of being cannot be *underemphasized*. Although Levinas continues to write entire subsections of *Otherwise*

*than being* that argue for the indifference of essence or being to responsible or ethical difference,<sup>78</sup> these sections should rightfully be modified and their conclusions mitigated by the fact that the sense of being (and of consciousness) is pre-originally constituted by its responsiveness to a problem that ethical difference poses but cannot (at the level of pure sensibility) answer. The ambiguity of being, which is an ambiguity between affirming the priority of the original, i.e., of relationships of truth that depend upon ontological difference, and affirming the priority of the pre-original difference between you and me, destabilizes the significance of being. Levinas *tends* to emphasize the ambiguity of the sense of Saying in order to give reasons for not accepting ontological difference as the sense of social relationships; yet to the degree that he succeeds in giving such reasons, he is necessarily committed by his own work to a reduction of the sense of ontological difference and being, and this reduction reveals a wholly different (and responsible) sense and significance of being. Compare this with Levinas's early work, in which, as we have seen, the ontology of fatal being generated the problematic of escape from ontological evil, to which alterity answered. By the time he writes *Otherwise than being*, close to twenty-five years later, this problem, despite appearing to govern the first chapters of *Otherwise than being*, no longer yields the most significant philosophical problematic.

We are confronted instead with the dilemma of fulfilling my obligations for all the others, to whom I am responsible without being able to discharge in full my

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<sup>78</sup> For example, AE 167-172/OB 131-135.

responsibility to any single one or the entire community of others (AE 200/OB 157).

Being, which makes possible a comparison of the needs and demands of others, makes visible the demands of the others, putting them *in relation to me*: this situating the needs of others in relation to me is ambiguous. One can interpret it either as a self-centered relativizing of the needs of others, or it can be interpreted as placing before me (both for consideration, but especially ahead of my own needs) all the needs that confront me in the others so that I can actually respond concretely. In the latter case, it would be a reasonable interpretation of Levinas's analysis to say that the needs and claims of others are not put before *someone else*, but always before me, as the one responsible or answerable for them to the others.

In this way, consciousness, which relates to being *because* “born as presence of the third” and as “proceeding from [the presence of the third] [...] is still disinterestedness” (AE 103-104/OB 160). Likewise, being, as the monstration of truth, does not supersede or simply deform pre-original relationships, for “*everything is shown for justice*” (AE 207/OB 163). If we take these claims seriously, then we may be tempted to say that there is no “passage” to be negotiated between the other and being, between responsibility and consciousness, as opposed or reified different regions or realms or things: consciousness *is the expression of ethical disinterestedness*. All of the weighing and calculating remains motivated by the proximity of the other and the others, which is never overcome, so that intentionality and its monstrations and calculations are never totally unmotivated by or ‘indifferent’ to alterity. The others still maintain their diachronic

relationship with me—diachrony is never overcome or canceled by the synchrony I temporalize.<sup>79</sup> All that is, “justice, society, the State and its institutions, exchanges and work understood on the basis of proximity—all that signifies that nothing can be subtracted from the responsibility of the one for the other” (AE 202-203/OB 159). And yet all that shows, including ontological difference (which in a sense *is not*), shows for justice (AE 207/OB 163).

### ***Il y a* Returns—Or Does It?**

What I have just said is evidently an interpretation of Levinas's work that can only be partial with respect to the totality of his writing, since his work does not cohere in every respect and contains many tensions, particularly with regard to being.<sup>80</sup> Given that this is so, the question then becomes: can we make any test of the above interpretation of Levinas's account of being that would support the idea that quietly, Levinas has shifted problematics to such a degree that the fatal ontology, and with it being, do not pose the most significant problems any longer?

I believe that we can, and that the test of the shift with respect to the sense of being and of ontology lies in Levinas's handling of *il y a* in *Otherwise than being*. For *il y a* was developed and described in order to show, using a form of phenomenological

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<sup>79</sup> Indeed, for there to be diachrony, or two temporalities that do *not* reduce to each other, I must also have my time, which is synchronic.

<sup>80</sup> In which case, the commentator's reading may try to make the same point with regard to Levinas's work that he had made with regard to Husserl's: that these tensions be exploited even if it means reading certain Levinasian claims against others.

ontology,<sup>81</sup> an evil *of* being that was ineliminable because it was not a privation of being, but rather was involved in the very articulation of the structure and sense of being. *Il y a*, in Levinas's fatal ontology, justified the turn to my relationship with alterity and the development of phenomenology beyond ontological investigations. As such, when it comes to *il y a*, there is little to no room for revision of its sense. This is perhaps why, in *Totality and Infinity*, *il y a* itself underwent no revision,<sup>82</sup> even when other aspects of Levinas's description of being—aspects like the immediacy of my relationship with being, which are directly related to *il y a*—did. If, however, my interpretation of the elemental in chapter four of the present work is correct, it is not clear that *il y a* as it had been developed in the 1940s can be allowed to stand unaltered.

By 1974, Levinas must have known that the concept remained problematically unintegrated with his latest analyses, for in *Otherwise than being*, after his treatment of being as answering to the problem posed by the plurality of differences among the other and the others, he returns to the notion of *il y a* in the subsection entitled “Sense and *il y a*” (AE 207-210/OB 162-165). This is the first time since his articulation of the concept of *il y a* in 1947-1948 that he gives it any concentrated treatment, and Levinas has this to say of it:

[T]he absurdity of *il y a*—as a modality of the one-for-the-other, as supported—*signifies*. The insignificance of its objective churning out [*ressassement*],

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<sup>81</sup> See chapters two and three of the present work.

<sup>82</sup> Nor even received significant redescription: in *Totality and Infinity*, *il y a* was barely mentioned, in fact. There was, therefore, hardly an opportunity to revise its description explicitly.

recommencing behind every negation, burdening me like the destiny of a subjection to every other to whom I am a subject, is the surplus of non-sense over sense, by which for the *Self* [*Soi*], expiation is possible—expiation that the oneself precisely signifies. *Il y a* is all the weight that alterity, supported by a subjectivity that does not found it, weighs (AE 208-209/OB 164).

There is much in this statement that must provoke puzzlement: for example, what “absurdity” and “non-sense” mean, as well as how there can be a surplus of non-sense over sense, and what “expiation” means here. But surely one of the most striking claims is that *il y a* is the “weight that alterity, supported by a subjectivity that does not found it, weighs.” *Il y a*, which had been the weight and horror of pure, existentless existing as eternal presence, is now the weight of *alterity*, of the other who subjectivates me without being constituted by me. It does not mean any longer existence without existents: it refers now explicitly to the alterity of the other person.

But what can this mean? Does *il y a* still signify a menacing depersonalization that renders ontological difference intrusively present as that from which I suffer? This is in no way clear, for although on one account that Levinas gives, *il y a* results from the uninterruptible equality of beings shown in their being thanks to ontological difference, which cannot “justif[y], in all equity, any instant of pause” and so establishes an equality “without respite, without possible suspension” (AE 208/OB 163), this ceaselessness ultimately refers back to the ceaseless necessity of justice.<sup>83</sup> Moreover, Levinas seems

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<sup>83</sup> It also, however, seems to me to include an unjustifiable assumption: that justice implies an absolute equality that is insensitive to the singularity of an individual person. This is an extremely liberal assumption, and seems to have a very formal understanding of justice in mind, a procedural justice that can send a Troy Davis to the execution chamber ostensibly for the sake of the inviolability of a legal procedure despite all evidence of mistrial and malfeasance by the accusers and witnesses. But why should we



now to say that *il y a* refers to my being subjected to every other; yet if *il y a* is a non-sense attending the objective perspective on my subjectivation to the others, *il y a* is a condition for the possibility of my expiation. In this case, expiation is not something outside of me, not some external rite that I must at some point perform and wield like a magic wand: rather, that I am a recurrent self, assigned by the other, *signifies* expiation, i.e., evil averted, just because I am substituted for the other and suffer it in his or her stead. When the suffering of the other in his or her need moves me to take the bread from my mouth (AE 81/OB 64), then on the basis of my sensibility being affected by your pain, I respond to my assignation by showing that your need pains me more than my own hunger, and by suffering hunger in your stead to ensure that you may eat, an evil *is* averted. Naturally, it is possible that I may not take the bread from my mouth, in which case my refusal signifies, at the level of sensibility, the fact that I enjoy my bread more than I suffer from your hunger—but neither this mode of the one-for-the-other, nor my expiation of your hunger is an ontological evil. We are dealing rather with a social evil, whose terms are you and me—and just because they are you and me, as we saw above, we are immediately involved with all the other others present “in” you, and so human society as a whole.

By this burdensomeness attending my assignation by you, essence is “subverted”:

Let one not say that the *il y a* results from a 'subjective impression.' In this

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understand justice to be primarily an uninterruptible equality that becomes its own, abstract end and norm? So abstract a notion of equality is neither necessary nor conducive to a Levinasian justice, which signifies based on the transcendence of the singularly Other.

overflowing of sense by non-sense, sensibility, the Self [*Soi*]—only is accused, in its bottomless passivity [*passivité sans fond*], as a pure sensible point, as disinterestedness, or subversion of essence. From behind the anonymous rustling of the *il y a* subjectivity attains passivity without assumption (AE 209/OB 164).

What Levinas seems to say is that *il y a* as a non-sense that I suffer constitutes me as a passivity prior to any assumption, and beyond my capacity to assume that which I suffer, i.e., your alterity, your pre-originality that constitutes me. If this is so, then the subversion of essence—not an undoing or overcoming of it—both founds essence as ontological difference upon the difference of diachrony, which signifies ambiguously in “saying,” and is a necessary moment of your subjectivation of me. *Il y a* is then a byproduct, however necessary, of our relationship, and a moment of the sense of saying considered prior to anything in particular that is said.

I do not pretend to have clarified all the perplexity that attends these passages; nor have I addressed all that might strike a reader as problematic in them. That would be a different task from my own, which is simply to show that, regardless of the difficulties and flaws in the above analyses, Levinas's *il y a* has radically changed since its original articulation. It is no longer the same concept, having been thoroughly relocated within his philosophy. It no longer poses the primary problem, but is involved in the signification of the response to or resolution to the problem of the need of the other and the others—for bread, and for justice.

If even *il y a* has been reduced to a foundation in non-ontological or ethical differences within the Saying, essence as ontological difference also has been

reconsidered and its sense altered. Although one might think that essence and its ontology pose the primary problem for Levinas, essence and its ontology ultimately signify justice as a *response* to a problem that occurs at the level of Saying, when Saying is taken on its own terms, i.e., those of sensibility. Being, whether this term means essence or *il y a*, participates in a solution, rather than posing the primary problems to which a phenomenology of interhuman differences must respond.

## CONCLUSION

One of the assumptions of this dissertation has been that the fate of *il y a* is significant: that how *il y a* is treated can serve as an index of the location and type of problem to which Levinas's work responds. The analyses undertaken minimally show that *il y a* plays a more or less explicit role in Levinas's thought—more explicit and foregrounded in the work that he did immediately after World War II, less explicit after that point. The real question has been whether, more than being merely more or less explicit in Levinas's mature texts, *il y a*'s general neglect, its brief reconsideration—and dramatic recontextualization—at the end of *Otherwise than being* indicated a shift away from considering *il y a*, and ontological evil, as posing the essential problem to which phenomenological philosophy is called to respond.

If Levinas's analysis of *il y a* near the end of *Otherwise than being* is not particularly clear, the general thrust of it, as we have seen in the preceding pages, is that *il y a* is a derivative moment of the work of justice, and even that the weight and burdensomeness—the painfulness—that characterize it are a moment in the signification of ethical and just relationships. My suffering in the course of the work of justice is my expiation of evil in my own body: by suffering in my flesh to avert disaster or injustice that might otherwise fall upon the other and others (the “overflowing of sense by non-

sense,”<sup>1</sup>), the “non-sense” of *il y a* signifies the sincerity or seriousness of my laboring to accomplish justice. The burdensomeness and painfulness of *il y a* differentiates the work of justice from a game<sup>2</sup> or from a detached form of charity, in which I would give from my surplus, rather than taking the bread from my mouth in response to the need of the other and the others.

When *il y a* signifies on the basis of the obligation to become just by working for justice, the “indifference” of being with respect to me, and to the relationship I sustain with the other and others, derives at least in part from *unjust* relationships with others: being makes itself felt in suffering due to social injustice as much as to natural hazard. If being makes possible suffering from indifference by constituting the movement of identification, as binding me to my bodily, i.e., sensible, existence, this is not a reason to claim that being thereby is evil or even bad, for such blame excludes reference to the social dimension of being. *Il y a* does not clearly identify an evil *of* being so much as the malign way in which the relationships of sociality, which do not cohere in a harmonious union, affect my relationship with being.

If this analysis is correct, then it constitutes a significant difference between Levinas's earliest work on ontology and being, and his mature considerations, and even between *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than being*. But it also forces a reevaluation

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<sup>1</sup> AE 209/OB 164: This obscure phrase I take to mean something like a disorienting suffering that is not a moment of my living my life for myself, and hence not unifiable with the living of my life *exclusively*, but which nevertheless occurs. If this is a correct interpretation, however, then the sense of “sense” cannot be simply located in the relationship that I have with another, for if I suffer for another I am intimately in relationship with that other.

<sup>2</sup> Levinas had explored the nature of a game early, in DEE 34-35, 46-48/EE 13-15, 21-22, and this description seems less dependent on his analysis of ontological difference and *il y a*.

of several key points: (1) if being is *not* merely “indifferent,” if it signifies on the basis of human sociality, then can being be said to be separate from human sociality? (2)

Correlatively, if there is no Saying *without* a Said, and if the subject of being is a subject of being *by* its sensible, bodily enjoyment, which *also* renders me “above being,”<sup>3</sup> then must we not reconsider the degree to which subjectivity and the face of the other are beings whose mode of being transfigures the self-centered being of human beings into a different mode of social being? (3) Further, does it not become a pressing need to articulate the subjective position of “we” that can sustain and accommodate the analysis of justice?

The third point seems especially urgent, for surely one way of saying the transcendence of my self-interested existence is to work out the way in which my “center” lies “outside” of me (as Levinas occasionally phrases it), insofar as I am allied with the needs of the other and the others. These needs of others inform my own needs. Do I not have an interest in justice, in seeing my own needs and desires met in such a way that they draw me into bonds of friendship and solidarity with others? Do I not have an interest in learning to need in ways that are consonant with the needs of others? If being is the way in which the work of justice is pursued, then do we not need to articulate a “we” that is *not* simply self-centered, nor an organic whole, but a transformed, transfigured enjoyment that does not *only* return me to myself?

Absent such a development, it seems impossible to avoid a sociality in which

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<sup>3</sup> In the negative sense that ontological difference does not sensibly itself manifest to me, and in the positive sense that there is more to the world (for it unfolds thanks to the home-making other's relationship with me) than what ontological difference alone can account for.

transcendence of my own self-centered mode of existing and striving-to-be could only come at the expense of my own existence: enjoyment could only be justified by subordinating it to the needs of others, rather than being justified by being transfigured and transformed into a bond with others. It is not clear that one could in fact articulate justice as including me without such a reconsideration of my enjoyment in relation to the other's vulnerability, or of my enjoyment in relation to the other's desire—a situation which Levinas does not ever discuss.<sup>4</sup>

To learn to enjoy with others, and not to strive for enjoyment that comes illegitimately at the expense of the needs of others, but to strive instead for enjoyment within relationships that do not depend upon exploiting others—is this not the most basic articulation of what it means to enjoy justly, or to justify being? To respect the other's desire, to learn to speak of the other's desire and not only his or her vulnerability and need—would not justice require the education of our sensibility to respond to the other's desire, too? Would not analyses that responded to this double silence in Levinas—the silence concerning the justification *of* my enjoyment, and silence concerning the desire of the other as a specifically ethical intention—be necessary if we were to develop an analysis of a “we” that avoided a homogenizing, anonymizing “we” proper to idealist political philosophies or of *falsely* totalizing political systems?<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Traditionally, objections to the separation of the face and my egoistic enjoyment focus on the defacing of my own body; but Levinas also fails, perhaps correlatively, to discuss the *desire* of the other. He analyzes the way the other's need obliges; he does not, however, analyze the way in which the other desires in relation to me, as myself both needing and desiring. Thus to match my defacement, the other is, as it were, neutered with respect to his or her desire.

<sup>5</sup> After all, the totality of a capitalist society depends upon class difference that fragments society into atomized individuals, who then are represented as a collective, harmonized body, even though they are not such a body and cannot be under such a structure.

By 1974, being has a role to play in Levinas's analysis of both justice and of the fundamental injustice of self-absorbed human existence. The “foothold” of goodness in being has been articulated at least in part, but the points above remain implicit consequences, I think, of Levinas's renewed analysis of being in relation to human sociality, and its obligatory character. To overcome these consequences requires a new analysis, one that will undoubtedly depart in significant ways from Levinas's analyses, and remains an outstanding task for future scholarship.



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## VITA

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