

EMMANUEL LEVINAS

Critical Assessments of
Leading Philosophers

Edited by
Claire Katz with Lara Trout

Volume I
Levinas, Phenomenology and His Critics

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| 1998 | Richard A. Cohen | Bris mila, desire and Levinas | <i>Shofar</i> 16(3) (Spring): 63–70 | III | 44 |
| 1998 | John E. Drabinski | Sense and icon: the problem of <i>Sinngebung</i> in Levinas and Marion | <i>Philosophy Today</i> 42, supplement: 47–58 | II | 27 |
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| 1998 | Diane Perpich | A singular justice: ethics and politics between Levinas and Derrida | <i>Philosophy Today</i> 42, supplement: 59–70 | IV | 74 |
| 1998 | John Sallis | Levinas and the elemental | <i>Research in Phenomenology</i> 28: 152–9 | I | 17 |
| 1998 | Stella Sandford | Writing as a man: Levinas and the phenomenology of Eros | <i>Radical Philosophy</i> 87 (Jan./Feb.): 6–17 | IV | 77 |
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| 1998 | Sonia Sikka | Questioning the sacred: Heidegger and Levinas on the locus of divinity | <i>Modern Theology</i> 14(3): 299–323 | III | 55 |

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| 1999 | Robert Bernasconi | The third party: Levinas on the intersection of the ethical and the political | <i>Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology</i> 30(1): 76–87 | I | 3 |
| 1999 | Roger Burggraeve | Violence and the vulnerable face of the other: the vision of Emmanuel Levinas on moral evil and our responsibility | <i>Journal of Social Philosophy</i> 30(1): 29–45 | IV | 61 |
| 1999 | Simon Critchley | The original traumatism: Levinas and psychoanalysis | S. Critchley, <i>Ethics-Politics-Subjectivity: Essays on Derrida, Levinas and Contemporary French Thought</i> , London: Verso, pp. 183–97 | II | 25 |
| 2000 | Howard Caygill | Levinas's political judgement: the <i>Esprit</i> articles 1934–1983 | <i>Radical Philosophy</i> 104 (Nov/Dec): 6–15 | IV | 63 |
| 2000 | Christian Diehm | Facing nature: Levinas beyond the human | <i>Philosophy Today</i> 44(1): 51–9 | IV | 66 |
| 2000 | John Drabinski | The possibility of an ethical politics: from peace to liturgy | <i>Philosophy and Social Criticism</i> 26(4): 49–73 | IV | 67 |
| 2000 | Jacques Rolland | 'He' (il) | J. Rolland, <i>Parcours de l'autrement: Lecture d'Emmanuel Levinas</i> , Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, pp. 97–124 | III | 54 |
| 2001 | Tina Chanter | Ontological difference, sexual difference, and time | T. Chanter, <i>Time, Death, and the Feminine: Levinas with Heidegger</i> , Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, pp. 37–74 | IV | 64 |
| 2001 | Sandor Goodhart | <i>Conscience</i> , conscience, consciousness: Emmanuel Levinas, the Holocaust and the logic of witness | J. Roth and E. Maxwell <i>et al</i> , <i>Remembering for the Future: The Holocaust in an Age of Genocide</i> , New York: Palgrave, pp. 98–113 | III | 47 |
| 2001 | Claire Elise Katz | Reinhabiting the house of Ruth: exceeding the limits of the feminine in Levinas | T. Chanter (ed.) <i>Feminist Interpretations of Emmanuel Levinas</i> , University Park, Pa.: Penn State University Press, pp. 145–70 | IV | 70 |
| 2001 | Brian Schroeder | The listening eye: Nietzsche and Levinas | <i>Research in Phenomenology</i> 31: 188–202 | II | 35 |

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| 2002 | Annabel Herzog | Is liberalism "all we need"? Lévinas's politics of <i>surplus</i> | <i>Political Theory</i> 30(2): 204–27 | IV | 69 |
| 2003 | Richard A. Cohen | Levinas and the paradox of monotheism | <i>Cahiers d'Etudes Lévinassiennes</i> , issue on Levinas, le monotheisme 1(2): 61–76 | III | 43 |
| 2003 | James Hatley | Nameless memory: Levinas, witness and politics | G. Ricci (ed.) <i>Justice and the Politics of Memory</i> , Religion and Public Life, vol. 33, Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers, pp. 33–54 | IV | 68 |
| 2005 | Bettina Bergo | Levinas's 'ontology' 1935–1974 | Not previously published | II | 23 |
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ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|--------|---|
| ADV | <i>L'au-delà du verset</i> |
| AE | <i>Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence</i> |
| BV | <i>Beyond the Verse</i> |
| CP | <i>Collected Philosophical Papers</i> |
| DE | <i>De'existence à l'existant</i> |
| DF | <i>Difficult Freedom</i> |
| DL | <i>Difficile Liberté</i> |
| DMT | <i>Dieu, la Mort, et le Temps</i> |
| DVI | <i>De Dieu qui vient à l'idée</i> |
| EaE | <i>De l'existence à l'existant</i> |
| EDE | <i>En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger</i> |
| EE | <i>Existence and Existents</i> |
| EeI | <i>Éthique et Infini</i> |
| EI | <i>Ethics and Infinity</i> |
| EN | <i>Entre Nous</i> |
| GDT | <i>God, Death, and Time</i> |
| GWC | <i>God Who Comes to Mind</i> |
| IR | <i>Is it Righteous to Be?: Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas</i> |
| ITN | <i>In the Time of the Nations</i> |
| NP | <i>Les Noms Propres</i> |
| NTR | <i>Nine Talmudic Readings</i> |
| OTB/OB | <i>Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence</i> |
| PN | <i>Proper Names</i> |
| TA | <i>Le Temps et l'autre</i> |
| TeI | <i>Totalité and infini: Essai sur l'extériorité</i> |
| TI | <i>Totality and Infinity: an Essay on Exteriority</i> |
| TN | <i>A l'heure des nations</i> |
| TO | <i>Time and the Other</i> |

INTRODUCTION

Introducing Levinas

In his essay, 'Signature', Emmanuel Levinas provides his biography in a form that he refers to as a 'disparate inventory', which reads almost like a laundry list detailing his intellectual history. And, he tells us, this inventory 'is dominated by the presentiment and the memory of the Nazi horror', thus framing the list he does present.¹

Emmanuel Levinas was born in 1906 in Kovno, Lithuania, a country where, as he explains, 'Jewish culture was intellectually prized and fostered and where interpretation of biblical texts was cultivated to a high degree'.² He spoke Russian and read the great Russian novelists, both at home and in secular schools. In 1915, at the age of 11, Levinas and his family moved to the Ukraine, when the Jews of Lithuania were expelled by the government. But in spite of the existing anti-Semitic pogroms, Levinas was nonetheless able to attend high school, although he finished his early schooling when his family returned to Lithuania in 1920. In 1923 he left for France and enrolled in the University of Strasbourg where he studied under a number of prominent professors including Charles Blondel, Maurice Halbwachs, Maurice Pradines, Henri Carteron and Martial Gueroult. It was Blondel who introduced Levinas to Henri Bergson, who Levinas credits as influencing his own conception of time. Pradines was also teaching a course on Edmund Husserl. And Levinas developed a friendship with Maurice Blanchot, which would later reveal itself to be life-saving. Importantly, many of those who taught Levinas had been adolescents at the time of the Dreyfus affair, the residue of which lingered in France when he arrived to study.

Levinas spent 1928–9 in Freiburg, studying with Husserl, and while there he also studied with Martin Heidegger, whose *Being and Time* had just been published in 1927. Levinas translated Husserl's Sorbonne lectures – the *Cartesian Meditations* – which introduced France to phenomenology. Although he had no intention of staying in Strasbourg, Levinas nonetheless became a naturalized citizen of France in 1930. Also in 1930 he began teaching at the Alliance Israélite Universelle du Bassin Méditerranéen, an organization whose goal was to spread Jewish education in the Mediterranean countries.

When the Second World War broke out Levinas enlisted as a French officer, and his knowledge of Russian and German made him a precious interpreter. In 1940 he was taken prisoner and he spent the next five years in a labour camp for Jewish POWs in Germany, where he wrote the bulk of *Existence and Existents*. Levinas's parents and his two brothers, who remained in Lithuania, were murdered. The Hebrew dedication in *Otherwise than Being* lists the names of his family members and his wife's family members killed during the war. It was his dear friend Blanchot who arranged to have Levinas's wife and daughter hidden in a monastery and thus saved them from deportation. When Levinas was released from the officer camp, he rejoined his wife and daughter. He then went to work for a branch of the Alliance, the Ecole Normale Israélite Orientale, which trained teachers of Jewish education in France. He was appointed director in 1947.

In 1946–7 Levinas gave a series of lectures at the College de Phenomenologie on Jean Wahl's invitation. These were later published as *Time and the Other*. Between 1947 and 1951, he learned Talmud from the mysterious Mordechai Shoshani, whom Levinas refers to as 'prestigious and merciless'. From 1957, for almost thirty years onwards, Levinas attended the annual conferences on Talmudic texts at the Colloquia of the French Jewish Intellectuals, where he presented his unique readings of select Talmudic texts. He earned his Docteur es Lettres in 1961, using his original text of *Totality and Infinity* as his thesis. He accepted positions at Poitiers and then Nanterre (1967). In 1973 he was appointed to a position at the Sorbonne. He published *Otherwise than Being* in 1974. He died on 25 December 1995, shortly after the death of his beloved wife, Raissa.

A brief sketch of Levinas's philosophy

In a 1982 Radio France interview with Emmanuel Levinas and Alain Finkielkraut, Shlomo Malka referred to Levinas as the 'philosopher of the "other"'.³ This designation accurately and succinctly describes Levinas and his philosophical project, which focused on responsibility to the other. Where philosophy previously, from Hegel to Kojève, incorporated the other as a category into a dialectic of desire and competition, Levinas's thought demonstrates a radical shift in the portrayal of the other. We can see in the French existential tradition the portrayal of the other as a threat to one's subjectivity and freedom. Levinas unfolds the other phenomenologically as having priority in the encounter. Instead of viewing the other as occupying a lower status in the zero-sum 'fight' for subjectivity, Levinas views the other as having priority in the relationship between the 'I' and the other.⁴ In Levinas's view, in fact, the self's response to the other founds subjectivity. Thus, the other not only does not threaten my subjectivity; the other is also necessary for my subjectivity. This shift in thinking alters not only the status of the other, but correlatively the relationship between an 'I' and an other.

It also reveals that we are not the isolated, independent monads that are characterized in much of the history of Western philosophy. Rather, we are always already connected to the other through our ethical obligation to the other.

The common understanding of the other in Levinas's writings is as an ethical other, the other to whom I am responsible. In *Time and the Other* (1946–7), Levinas had not yet named the encounter with the other as an ethical relationship. He explains that the aim of these lectures is to show that 'time is not the achievement of an isolated and lone subject, but that it is the very relationship of the subject with the Other'.⁵ His concern is to show that time is not a series of instants strung together in a timeline to form an eternity. The lectures in *Time and the Other* begin by offering an elegant phenomenology of solitude, the *il y a* (elemental being), enjoyment, materiality, death, eros, the feminine and, finally, fecundity. Levinas's concern in these early essays is to show how the existent contracts existence, how the existent becomes a 'subject'. In so doing, Levinas focuses on the materiality of the embodied subject in order to show how that materiality, that 'normal' timeline, is interrupted. The crucial point Levinas makes in his early phenomenology is that 'it seems impossible to speak of time in a subject alone, or to speak of a purely personal duration'.⁶ We are never empirically alone in the world. We are always with other others. Thus in these early writings, organized around a critique of Heidegger's analysis of temporality as solitary projection, Levinas criticizes Heidegger for not providing an adequate account of the specificity of the instant in its materiality for an embodied subject.

Levinas's discussion of solitude and mastery leads him to his discussion of death, the first interruption of that solitude and mastery, because we experience the death of the other, the only death we live through. Contrary to Heidegger's notion of death as confirmation of my solitude, death on Levinas's account demonstrates that we are in relationship to something absolutely other to us. Ultimately, Levinas argues that

The relationship with the Other [*autrui*], the face-to-face with the Other, the encounter with a face that at once gives and conceals the Other, is the situation in which an event happens to a subject who does not assume it, who is utterly unable in its regard, but where nonetheless in a certain way it is in front of the subject. The other 'assumed' is the Other.⁷

Thus, in this early work the relationship to death is never viewed as a subject's own most possibility; instead it opens onto the relationship to the other.

Time and the Other closes with fecundity, which Levinas calls the 'victory over death'. Levinas was to return to the discussions of eros and fecundity

in 'Beyond the Face', the last section of *Totality and Infinity*. One might say, then, that *Totality and Infinity* continues where *Time and the Other* ended. Although the section 'Beyond the Face', which includes Levinas's discussions of eros, fecundity and filiality, appears at the end of *Totality and Infinity*, significant parts were written soon after the publication of *Time and the Other*, leading one to believe that the project in *Totality and Infinity* continues many of his original themes. This is but one example of the continuity of themes in Levinas's work, a continuity that would be developed over four decades.

Totality and Infinity introduces us to the ethical relation and reconceives it such that it bears little resemblance to his previous discussions of ethics. For Levinas, ethics is an asymmetrical human relation, and the consequent obligation that I have to an other and which does not require the other to return my obligation. This hyperbolic conception of ethics, as he called it, gave rise to criticisms from solipsism to the use of phenomenology. We also find scholarship simply devoted to clarifying what Levinas means by ethics. Additionally, from *Totality and Infinity* we have a number of terms that become fundamental watchwords of Levinasian scholarship – the Same and the Other; transcendence and height; ethics and politics; asymmetry and responsibility; intersubjective space and interruption. It is in *Totality and Infinity* that we also find his most robust descriptions and discussions of the 'feminine', of hospitality and dwelling, of eros and fecundity. These too gave rise to an abundance of commentaries from both his admirers and his critics.⁸

Finally, Levinas's second magnum opus, *Otherwise than Being: An Essay on Exteriority* (1974), appears to be a break with his original project. Although whether there is an actual break remains a question in the scholarship, the continuity of so many themes that run throughout his work, in particular themes that are introduced as early as 1935 and then developed as late as 1974, suggests that Levinas is engaged in one continuous project. Regardless, *Otherwise than Being* is an ambitious, moving account of responsibility and subjectivity. By 1974 Levinas had reworked his concepts to a mature description to include clear and more powerful appropriations of concepts from the Hebrew Scriptures. His references to persecution, hostage, expiation, obligation, proximity and substitution are the philosophical reflections of the experiences in a life that gave rise to the two dedications that appear at the front of this book – the first, in French, to those who suffered the same anti-Semitism, the same hatred, and the second, in Hebrew, listing the members of his family and his wife's family who perished in the death camps. *Otherwise than Being* is both dense and lyrical, requiring sustained attention to make sense of the difficult and original themes of the prophetic, messianism, substitution and adverbial meanings that permeate its pages.

Some have suggested that this book is Levinas's response to Derrida's criticisms of *Totality and Infinity*, expressed in his essay 'Violence and

Metaphysics' (1968). *Otherwise than Being* is often thought to respond to the charge that *Totality and Infinity* remained trapped in ontological language, despite Levinas's insistence that he provided a description of an ethical relation that is pre-reflective. In order to accomplish his task, Levinas had to write in a way that did not directly point to what he hoped finally to express. Finally, it is in *Otherwise than Being* that many have sought the possibility of a Levinasian politics, because that work elaborates a broad view of the prophetic as bearing witness.

In addition to writing philosophy books, Levinas published an extraordinary number of essays, most of them collected into books. Many of his essays express similar themes or explore one theme in particular. Often these essays were precursors to the same themes in the larger book. The essays collected in this volume were seminal in helping scholars navigate Levinas's work, both at the introductory level and at a more sophisticated level.

Notes

- 1 See Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, tr. Sean Hand (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), p. 291.
- 2 See the interview with Richard Kearney, in *Face to Face with Levinas*, ed. Richard A. Cohen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), p. 17. For more information on Levinas's biography see the interviews collected in Jill Robbins (ed.) *Is it Righteous to Be?* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2001), Marie-Anne Lescourret, *Emmanuel Levinas* (Flammarion, 1994) and Salomon Malka, *Emmanuel Levinas: la vie et la trace* (Éditions Jean-Claude Lattès, 2002).
- 3 See 'Ethics and Politics' in *Difficult Freedom*.
- 4 Levinas distinguishes between *autre* and *autrui*; *Autre* and *Autrui*. Unfortunately, his use of these terms is not always consistent. *Autrui*, lower-case or capitalized, refers to the personal other, while *autre* generally refers to otherness as such – other table, other chair or alterity – otherness. However, there are several instances where *autre* is capitalized – to indicate its contrast to the Same and occasionally to refer to God, the latter being especially important. The early translations of Levinas's translated 'Autrui' as 'Other' with the upper case O, and 'autre' with the lower case, 'other'. For ease of reading, I have, in most cases, left 'other' in the lower case, regardless of its referent. It should be clear when the reference is to the personal other. Some of this discussion was taken from my recent book, *Levinas, Judaism, and the Feminine* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003).
- 5 Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, tr. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), p. 39.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 77.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 79.
- 8 See the essays in Volume IV of this collection.

LEVINAS'S SKEPTICAL CRITIQUE OF METAPHYSICS AND *ANTI-HUMANISM*

Peter Atterton

Source: *Philosophy Today* 41(4) (1997): 491–506.

“Knowledge” is a referring back: in its essence a *regressus in infinitum*. That which comes to a standstill (at a supposed *causa prima*, at something unconditioned, etc.) is laziness, weariness—

Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*¹

Knowledge as a critique, as a tracing back to what precedes freedom, can arise only in a being that has an origin prior to its origin [*qui a une origine en deçà de son origine*].

Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*²

Skepticism regarding morality is what is decisive.

Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*³

Language is already skepticism.

Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*⁴

“The will to truth requires a critique—let us thus define our task—the value of truth must *for once be experimentally*—called into question.”⁵ When Nietzsche declared this in the *Genealogy of Morals*, he had in mind an agenda for philosophy that would be both less ambitious and more fearless than anything that had gone before him. The “philosophers of the future” would be required to give up their traditional aspiration to knowledge, their *Wille zur Wahrheit*, and engage in an experimental critique in which all truths hitherto would be considered types of “error.”⁶ More radical than Kant’s “experiment of pure reason,”⁷ critique would be brought to bear not only on claims to knowledge and truth, but on knowledge and truth

themselves; not only on claims made by reason, but on reason itself. This critical enterprise was undertaken by Heidegger, among others, for whom the *Destruction* of the Latin *ratio* provided thinking with its "task" at a time when the truth of Being errs in technology. Since then it has become a hallmark of continental philosophy, whose anti-metaphysical and anti-humanist agenda is generally thought to announce the end of philosophy—or what used to be called philosophy.

Where does Levinas stand in relation to the end of philosophy?⁸ A brief survey of remarks made over the last three decades makes an unambiguous answer to the question impossible. On the one hand, Levinas has treated with skepticism the declaration that philosophy is at an end, which he variously describes as "premature,"⁹ "not at all certain,"¹⁰ merely an "interruption" (OB170/Ae216). And yet, on the other hand, he has also appeared to affirm it, as when he avers that "Kantianism is the 'beginning of the end' of philosophy,"¹¹ an end "we are deep into,"¹² and to which "there is no end."¹³ What are we to make of this equivocation? And what does it tell us about Levinas's own philosophy? Does Levinas's refusal to forgo philosophizing in the name of ethics as "first philosophy" (TI304/Ti281) belie his professed break with the tradition of metaphysics going back to Parmenides?¹⁴ Or, on the contrary, does it place him beyond the tradition all the more resolutely and firmly in that it runs counter to the totalizing propensity of philosophy, even when it pronounces on its own finitude?

In the following discussion I wish to explore Levinas's equivocal stance vis-à-vis the end of metaphysics and humanism from within the general framework of "critique." The concept is a central one in Levinas's work though it has yet to receive a sustained treatment in the secondary literature.¹⁵ Defined by Kant as "a science of the mere examination of reason, its sources and limits,"¹⁶ intended to guard against the contradictions, paralogisms, and other fallacies into which philosophy falls when it neglects the conditions of finite human cognition, critique in Levinas's estimation constitutes an exceptional resource *within* the tradition of philosophy for transgressing the "closure" (*clôture*) that has come to be synonymous with its end. To be sure, Levinas in no way seeks to minimize the break with tradition that the discourse of closure itself might be said to accomplish. Levinas seeks neither to return philosophy to its naive presumption to be untrammelled by language and tradition, nor to overturn the claim that the metaphysics of presence has come to an end in the sense of having exhausted its possibilities.¹⁷ The important thing for Levinas is that these great insights constitute a break with philosophy understood as *ontology*, though they do not amount to a break with philosophy as such. Beyond its traditional ontological refrain, philosophy is said to survive the proclamation of its end, and does so precisely in the manner of critique, which leads to the other in Levinas's view.

I

To understand the central importance Levinas attaches to critique, it is useful to begin with the discussion early in Section I of *Totality and Infinity* entitled "Metaphysics Precedes Ontology." The discussion is one of the most commented upon in the secondary literature, yet it has not always been clearly understood by writers, including perhaps even Derrida,¹⁸ who see Levinas as engaged *merely* in "reversing" (TI47/Ti17) the Heideggerian thesis according to which *Ontologie fondamentale* has priority over the metaphysical preoccupation with beings. Such a reading overlooks the fact that Levinas is seeking to go beyond the ontic-ontological distinction altogether through his prioritizing what is called "metaphysics": "Metaphysical thought is attention to speech or welcome of the face, hospitality and not thematization" (TI299/Ti276). To be sure, both operations are closely interwoven. In the preface of *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas maintains that the ambiguity involved in speaking of metaphysics as *both* theory and practice is "deliberate and constitutes one of the main theses of this book" (TI29/Tixvii).

"Metaphysics Precedes Ontology" opens with Levinas ascribing to philosophical theory two diametrically opposed tendencies: *respect* and *disrespect* for alterity. Levinas appears to say little about the first tendency, save that it "lets the known being manifest itself while respecting its alterity and without marking it in any way whatever by this cognitive relation" (TI42/Ti12). The second (disrespect), is spoken of in reference to ontology, whose aim at comprehension and knowledge is identified with "the freedom of the knowing being encountering nothing which, other with respect to it, could limit it" (TI42/Ti13). By designating these two tendencies as moments of *all* philosophical theory, Levinas is doing more than making a formal Heideggerian distinction between *Gelassenheit* and classical subject-object cognition. He is attempting to establish what he considers to be a totalizing propensity on the part of philosophy in general, to which *Gelassenheit* is no exception in his eyes: "the dialectic which thus reconciles freedom and obedience in the concept of truth presupposes the primacy of the same, which marks the direction of and defines the whole of Western philosophy" (TI45/Ti16).¹⁹

A few pages earlier Levinas had made the less *totalizing* claim that "Western philosophy has *most often* been an ontology: a reduction of the other to the same" (TI43/Ti13). The remark directly followed an investigation into "another structure essential for metaphysics":

In its [theory's]²⁰ comprehension of being (or ontology) it is concerned with critique. [*Elle a le souci de critique dans son intelligence de l'être—ou ontologie.*] It discovers the dogmatism and naive arbitrariness of its spontaneity, and calls into question the freedom of the exercise of ontology; it then seeks to exercise this freedom in such a way as to

turn back at every moment to the origin of the arbitrary dogmatism of this free exercise.

(TI43/Ti13)

As a mode of that which it puts into question, i.e., theory, is not critique *immanent*? Is it not a critique of philosophy by philosophy? In what sense, then, is it capable of “turning back” to the origin of spontaneity to disclose that which does not originate in spontaneity? Would this not call for a bracketing of theory altogether?

According to Levinas, “critique . . . would lead to an infinite regression if [it] remained an ontological movement, an exercise of freedom, a theory” (TI43/Ti13). It would be premature to consider this as a straightforward concession to transcendental logic, which does indeed stipulate that critique discover a priori conditions that are strictly independent of what is conditioned. Although not every commentator agrees,²¹ one of the important demonstrations of *Totality and Infinity* is precisely the paucity of resources within what Levinas likens to the “transcendental method” (TI25/Tixii) to avoid any such *regressus*. This is particularly evident in Section II, “Interiority and Economy,” for example, where a deduction of conditions of possibility for entry into the face to face relation, presupposing a break with participation in the totality, is thrown into disarray by the fact that the face to face is presented also as a condition for any such break: “the idea of infinity, revealed in the face, does not only require a separated being; the light of the face is necessary for separation” (TI151/Ti125). This confounding of the language of conditions—the “anterior posteriori” (TI170/Ti144)—is also seen at work in Levinas’s remarkable reading of Descartes’s *Meditations* in *Totality and Infinity*. Since it is Descartes who provides Levinas not only with the vocabulary of the “infinite,” but also a model of critique extending beyond the cadre of ontology characteristic of Western thinking, it is worth reminding ourselves of the details of Levinas’s interpretation.

It has long been recognized that Descartes argues in a circle in the “Third Meditation” when he uses the clarity and distinctness of the *cogito* to support the apodicticity of the idea of the infinite, and then calls upon the idea of the infinite as a support for the apodicticity of the *cogito*. What is typically treated as *vitiosus* in Descartes’s argument, however, is considered by Levinas to be a *virtus*: “that there could be a chronological order distinct from the ‘logical’ order, that there could be several moments in the progression, that there is a progression—here is separation” (TI54/Ti24). This progression is *non-linear* to the extent that the invocation of the infinite, while chronologically second in the explicit order of reasons, is nevertheless found to be logically implicit within the procedure of doubt itself. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas quotes the following well-known passage from Descartes: “I clearly understand that . . . that my perception of the infinite . . . is in some way [*quodammodo*] prior to my perception of the finite,

that is myself. For how could I understand that I doubted or desired—that is, lacked something—and that I was not wholly perfect, unless there were in me some idea of a more perfect being which enabled me to recognize my own defects by comparison?”²² The fact that Descartes makes a demonstration of this only *after* having attained the certainty of the *cogito* is not simply owing to the necessity of carrying the analysis a stage further, and conferring clarity and distinctness on a world otherwise paralyzed by the possibility of doubt *redivivus*. It is due to the fact that the analysis has become a “reflection on reflection” (TI210/Ti186), whereby Descartes is engaged in retracing his steps and uncovering what made the initial certainty of the *cogito* possible. It is this retrospection that stops the invocation of the infinite being merely arbitrary, or apologetic, even though the certainty of the *cogito* was attained seemingly independently of all other considerations and had indeed appeared to rest on the strength of solipsistic reason alone. Its condition, namely, “some idea of a more perfect being,” had up to that point remained invisible.

According to Levinas this tracing back of critique, so as to reveal the hitherto hidden condition of truth and certainty,

leads it [critique] beyond theory and ontology: critique does not reduce the other to the same as does ontology, but calls into question the exercise of the same. A calling into question of the same—which cannot occur within the egoist spontaneity of the same—is brought about by the other. We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other ethics.

(TI43/Ti13)

The movement of critique does not merely regress upon a condition which could be said to reside in consciousness itself. Were this the case, then it would constitute a transcendental thesis and return critique to ontology. Critique breaks with immanence—is precisely *transcendent*—in that it leads to the other who conditions it while remaining outside of consciousness as such. As a recognition of the arbitrariness of theory, its *lack* of justification up to that point (Descartes’s *imperfectio*), critique is said by Levinas to coincide with the dawn of morality itself. “Morality begins when freedom, instead of being justified by itself, feels itself to be arbitrary and violent. The search for the intelligible and the manifestation of the *critical* essence of knowing, the movement of a being this side [*en deçà de*] of its condition, begin together” (TI84/Ti56).

I shall say more about this “critical essence,” and the concession it makes to ontological language later. Suffice it to underline here that it is not a matter of scruples, of *weighing* one’s faults and finding oneself wanting. It is not what Nietzsche dismissed as “being ashamed in front of oneself.”²³ According to Levinas, “the consciousness of failure is already theoretical.

... The first consciousness of my immorality is not my subordination to facts, but to the Other, to the Infinite" (TI83/Ti55).²⁴ To sit in judgment upon oneself would amount to a lapse of judgment, an indulgence. It would set forth a verdict deriving from implacable and universal principles that would require justification in turn, leading to an infinite regress.

Although in *Totality and Infinity* it is Descartes who supplies the model of critique "as a tracing back to what precedes freedom" (TI85/Ti57), in the publications that follow we find Kant taking over this role. Levinas's reading of Descartes is extremely atypical and selective. He repudiates subject-object dualism, the project of setting philosophy on mathematical-like foundations, and the ontological argument.²⁵ All of these are considered dogmas which criticism is called upon to expose at every turn. Not that Levinas will go on to withdraw any of his earlier criticisms of Kant. On the contrary, with one or two notable exceptions,²⁶ the "I think," the transcendental unity of apperception, extolled by Hegel in the *Science of Logic* as "one of the profoundest and truest insights to be found in the *Critique of Pure Reason* . . . the nature of the Concept [*Begriff*],"²⁷ is the focus of a renewed attack after *Totality and Infinity*. The assimilatory activity of transcendental constitution, in which disparate data of consciousness are brought to synthetic unity via categorial schematization, is presented in *Otherwise Than Being* as the epitome of the ontological reduction of the other to the same.²⁸

On this occasion, I shall leave aside Levinas's important affinity with the practical philosophy in particular,²⁹ and focus instead on the key ethical significance he attaches to Kantian critique and the introduction of a "new rationality"³⁰ into philosophy. Herein lies a "decisive moment" (*krisis*, from *krinein*, to separate, discern, decide) in Levinas's view, inaugurating what has come to be known as the "end of philosophy." In "De la conscience à la veille," appearing in 1974, we read:

Kantianism, where one sees the "beginning of the end" of philosophy, will have been the decisive moment of this call to a philosophy which is different from science. This moment is characterized by the denunciation of the transcendental illusion—of the radical malice in good faith, or in a reason innocent of every sophism and that, paradoxically, Husserl called naïveté.

(Dv35)

Recall that for Husserl the *positive* sciences are "naïve" with respect to the way they regard nature as simply "there," that is, as existent in space and time prior to the constitutive role of consciousness.³¹ His attempt to reconcile both reason and experience in the "transcendental attitude" evinces a clear affinity with Kantian critique, which negatively implies freedom from presuppositions, expectations and prejudices borne of the pre-Copernican standpoint (what Husserl would liken to the *natuerliche Einstellung*), and

positively prepares the way for a new conception of philosophy as a science (*Wissenschaft*) of true origins and beginnings, in which the fundamental forms of cognition are validated synthetically a priori.

If Husserl's own *naïveté* was to posit the Cartesian ideal of an absolute beginning in philosophy,³² then conversely that of Kant was to "make completeness [his] chief aim," asserting in the preface to the first edition of the *First Critique* that he had solved *all* philosophy's problems, or at least supplied their "key."³³ As Deleuze points out in *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, "Kant does not realize his project of immanent critique. Transcendental philosophy discovers principles which still remain external to the conditioned. Transcendental principles are principles of conditioning and not of internal genesis."³⁴ What is lacking in *Kritik*, according to Deleuze, is precisely an account of how reason becomes self-legislating. As the propaedeutic to a system of pure reason, from which is derived the principles of "duty," "good will," "respect" (*observantia*), "humanity as an end in itself," and so forth, transcendental critique discovers the a priori conditions of what experience *ought* to be (and not merely what happens to be independently of reason), without the unconditioned necessity of reason's own causality, under the name of freedom, being revealed to us. What is the ground of reason, in reason itself? Wherein lies its own justification? Whence derives its imperatival force? As Kant says, we can only comprehend its incomprehensibility.³⁵

Of course, Kant can hardly be blamed for failing to give answers to questions he considered human reason wholly incapable of answering, questions that exceed the limits of knowledge and experience in the vain pursuit of an ever receding goal, a kind of *regressus ad infinitum*.³⁶ What is less certain is that Kant was prepared to contest in a radical way the traditional ideals of knowledge, morality, and religion themselves, even if the last two were considered beyond the reach of human cognition and unknowable as such. For all his drawing of the boundary between reason and understanding, the demarcation of the faculties, and the delimitation of their spheres of influence, Kant's famous "critical" questions: *Was kann ich kennen?* *Was soll ich tun?* *Was darf ich hoffen?*³⁷—said in the *Logic* to be "at bottom" one question: *Was ist der Mensch?*³⁸—remain metaphysical and humanist in essence. As such they have come to be the primary focus of what is often referred to as "post-Kantian critique," whose practitioners include not only Nietzsche, Marx, Freud, Heidegger, and their followers, but also Levinas. Nevertheless, Levinas's relation with such iconoclastic company is no less ambiguous than his relation with the tradition of humanism it seeks to oppose, as I hope to show in the next part of this study.

II

It is sometimes said that Levinas's thinking remains this side of its intention to depart from the tradition because it is humanistic. Whatever its

critique of the traditional norms of subjectivity (*hypokeimenon*, ego, psyche, consciousness, person, etc.), however much it delimits humanism and metaphysics, at issue is a kind of re-evaluation and revalorization of *l'humain*, abstracted from culture, history, and politics. Levinas, it is argued, does not merely remain within metaphysics in virtue of a closure (*clôture*) that would preclude a space and conceptuality from which to think outside of metaphysics; he remains firmly within it because he has yet to negotiate in a decisive manner the twin deaths of God and man.

It is true that Levinas does not repudiate humanism wholesale, electing rather to philosophize "in ways that might seem somewhat unfashionable,"³⁹ as Blanchot has amicably put it. In the preface to *Humanisme de l'autre homme*, a trilogy of essays appearing in 1972, Levinas concedes the "out-of-date" (*inactuel*) nature of a reflection where "the word humanism is no longer a source of alarm."⁴⁰ Nevertheless, this appeal to a term that is nearly always treated with suspicion, if not outright contempt, is meant to be anything but a recrudescence of humanist themes oblivious to their contemporary critique. Such a reflection, according to Levinas,

ne se confond pas avec une inattention quelconque à l'endroit des opinions dominantes de notre temps, défendues avec tant de brillant et de maîtrise. L'inactuel signifie, ici, *l'autre* de l'actuel, plutôt que son ignorance et sa négation.

(Hall)

The subtlety and complexity of Levinas's position is not always appreciated by thinkers who consider that merely by opposing a traditional language and terminology they can end them. The repeated lesson from Parmenides to Shakespeare and beyond has been that mere contradiction (or even a self-imposed silence) is powerless to stop the return of presence at the heart of negation, defined by its contradictory. As Nietzsche urged: "If anything signifies our *humanization* [*Vermenschlichung*]*—a genuine and real progress—*it is the fact that we no longer require excessive oppositions, indeed no oppositions at all."⁴¹ Levinas's refusal to dismiss humanism outright is not attributable to naiveté. On the contrary, it is because he has learnt from what he calls the "dominant opinions of our time," and learnt well, that he seeks to avoid the metaphysical gesture of an unqualified opposition to either humanism or anti-humanism.

The point can be made in reference to Heidegger and the famous "Letter on Humanism."⁴² At a decisive moment in the essay, Heidegger writes: "But this opposition [to humanism] does not mean that such thinking aligns itself against the humane and advocates the inhuman, that it promotes the inhumane and deprecates the dignity of man. Humanism is opposed because it does not set the *humanitas* of man high enough."⁴³ The fact that Heidegger goes on to argue that "the proper dignity of man"⁴⁴ can only be restored by

bringing authentic Dasein back into the "clearing" (*Lichtung*) of Being itself is not the main issue here. According to Levinas, the crucial significance of Heidegger's anti-humanism lies in the fact that it opens up other vistas and prepares a space for rethinking *humanitas* in non-ontological terms. Levinas opposes neither humanism nor Heideggerianism outright. Indeed, it would be more true to say that he plays off one against the other in order to say something not said by either. One of the most subtle examples of his siding with Heidegger against humanism while distancing himself from ontology is the following remark from *Otherwise Than Being*: "Humanism has [*doit*] to be denounced only because it is not sufficiently human" (OB128/Ae164). Note the dissimilarity in mood between this and Heidegger's remark ("Humanism is opposed . . ."). For Levinas the denunciation of humanism is *not* ontological but ethical. It is nothing less than a moral injunction.

In disqualifying the metaphysical conception of "man," how does anti-humanist critique make possible the restoration of an *ethical* meaning and value attaching to human existence surpassing that found within metaphysical humanism, but not wholly alien to it? This is the central problematic of "Humanism and An-archy" (1968), one of three essays collectively and revealingly entitled *Humanism de l'autre homme*.

The essay opens with a familiar account of the "crisis" into which humanism has fallen.⁴⁵ The aim of Levinas's opening discussion is not, as is his usual practice, to present one side of an argument in preparation for challenging it. He does indeed toy with the objection that anti-humanist discourse, as a product of reflection and knowledge, requires the mediation of the (transcendental) subject it places in question (CP128/Ha68),⁴⁶ but does not pursue it since here anti-humanism is to serve as a point of departure for a renewed reflection on the human. As a function of structures (linguistic, logical, etc.) determined by a particular historical *a priori*, the subject of the statement occupies a position within discourse that *any* individual is capable of occupying, and who is thus no longer identical with the "author" of a formulation. This neutralization of the subject's freedom must be negotiated:

We can then ask: might not humanism have a meaning if we think through the way being belies freedom? Can we not find a meaning (a "reverse" meaning, to be sure, but such is the only authentic one here) in freedom itself, starting with the very passivity of the human in which its inconsistency seems to become apparent? Can we not find a meaning without thereby being brought back to the "being of entities," system, and matter?

(CP131–2/Ha73)⁴⁷

Levinas immediately goes on to add: "It would be a question of a new concept of passivity, of a passivity more radical than that of an effect in a causal series, on the hitherside of consciousness and knowing" (CP132/Ha73). The

formulation is “new” but the reflection behind it is as old as the Talmud: “to leave men without food is a fault that no circumstance attenuates; the distinction between the voluntary and the involuntary does not apply here” (Rabbi Yochanan, *Synhedrin* treatise, quoted TI201/Ti175).

In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas attempted to reformulate the illegitimacy of the exclusive disjunction apropos of the welcome of the other as follows: “the term welcome of the Other expresses a simultaneity of activity and passivity which places the relation with the other outside of the dichotomies valid for things: outside of the *a priori* and the *a posteriori*, activity and passivity” (TI89/Ti62). The double (or triple) emphasis is a clear indication of the extent to which Levinas at the time of writing *Totality and Infinity* was already involved in an effort to mitigate what he would later describe as its “ontological language,”⁴⁸ anticipating the later “abusive” register of *Otherwise Than Being*. As a “simultaneity [f. *similis*, like] of activity and passivity,” the welcome cannot be said to be reducible to either activity or passivity, whose exclusive disjunction is “deferred” in default of a grammatical middle voice.⁴⁹ In “Humanism and An-archy,” an essay contemporary with “La Substitution” (1968), the kernel of *Otherwise Than Being*, the expository strategy of antilogy is radicalized. “Ethics here makes its entry into philosophical discourse, which at the start was strictly ontological, as an extreme turning around of its possibilities” (CP135/Ha77). The polymeric notion of “*a passivity more passive than any passivity*” (CP135/Ha77), introduced to render an “authentic” meaning to humanism, “a pre-originary susceptibility, more ancient than the origin” (CP134/Ha75), a “pre-logical subjection” (CP135/Ha77), is perhaps the most extreme example of this linguistic “turn.”

Few criticisms are likely to run deeper than the charge that Levinas’s account of responsibility as “pure passivity that precedes freedom” (CP136/Ha79) is a rarefied form of determinism. Another is that it cannot explain the banality of immorality—the everyday “fault” of leaving others without food *de facto*. It is awkward to maintain these criticisms simultaneously, but they are inevitably raised in the same discussions. What is interesting about Levinas’s discussion of them in the second half of “Humanism and An-archy” is the way he manages to allay what in the context are predominantly *humanist* scruples by reintroducing choice into ethics without reducing ethics to choice.

In traditional humanism, choice is considered to lie at the metaphysical foundation of morals. To choose Kant’s ethics as an example, the freedom (*Willkür*) to adopt *immoral* maxims remains ever intact and inviolable despite the moral compulsion of *Wille*, which as the normative or legislative aspect of the will is neither free nor unfree. It is precisely this capacity to act on principles grounded in the agent’s sensible (“pathological”) nature that stops the determination of *Willkür* by *Wille* lapsing into determinism, or becoming what Scheler coined “logonomy.”⁵⁰ In a manner that might be

thought to perform the same Kantian gesture, Levinas writes: "There is, *at the heart of* the submission to the Good, the seduction of irresponsibility . . . This temptation to separate oneself from the Good is the very *incarnation of the subject*" (CP137/Ha80). The separation is considered ultimately "illusory" (CP137n19/Ha109n18), however, since it is incapable of undoing the original—or "pre-original"—*non-erotic* bond with the other, which is also said to be tied in Kantian⁵¹ sensibility. Nevertheless, the incentive of *irresponsibility* is significant here for it paves the way for the reintroduction of spontaneity into ethics as "the very birth of the ego in the obeying *will*" (CP137/Ha80).⁵² In what sense?

The "birth of the ego" is the origin of a subject that posits itself as the author of its own actions *by potentiating one of these affectivities, either need or Desire, to determining force*. In the movement already familiar from Descartes, this potentiation is the work of representation "after the event." The work of representation is found to rest on a "hidden" condition that has not traversed the present of consciousness and does not receive a meaning from memory, a condition that remains invisible right up until the act has been consummated in what looked like a free decision on the part of the subject. The subject thus does not begin as a spontaneity and is not defined as such. It is spontaneous only in the process of welcoming (or refusing) that which could never have been assumed in full freedom and consciousness. Hence Levinas's remark in *Totality and Infinity*: "The will is free to assume this responsibility in whatever *sense* it likes; it is not free to refuse this responsibility itself" (Ti218–219/Ti194).

Let us briefly recapitulate. Although Levinas's and Kant's ethics are perhaps closer than is sometimes imagined, especially when we consider the principled impossibility of explaining any moral incentive (*Triebfeder*) after the Copernican revolution,⁵³ crucially the starting place of each is quite different. Whereas the Kantian *personalitas moralis* is precisely defined in terms of its freedom to set ends or goals ("a *person* is the subject whose actions can be *imputed* to him"),⁵⁴ the Levinasian subject finds itself already disposed toward or predestined for the other "before the subject had time—that is, the distance—necessary for choice" (CP134/Ha76). Thus it is not spontaneity, but "susceptibility" that defines the "very subjectivity of the subject" (CP134n13/Ha108n12).

Anti-humanism has helped bring this to light: "perhaps the clearest result of the critique of humanism is the "impossibility" of speaking of man as the individual of a genus. "I" and the "other" for whom I am responsible are precisely *different* by virtue of this unilateral responsibility" (CP131n6/Ha107n5). It matters little perhaps that thinkers such as Nietzsche—"Is not Nietzsche the exceptional breath to make this beyond resound?" (CP132/Ha107n6)⁵⁵—and Heidegger would be the last to consider their work as having an underlying ethical *sense*—at least it hardly constitutes an objection under the circumstances. Were not these thinkers

among the first and most successful in calling into question the humanist privilege granted to spontaneity of the will and authorial intention? Would not their unwillingness to accept a responsibility where "*tout est grave*" (CP136/Ha79), and which is "prior to the amphibology of being and beings" (CP133/Ha74), serve only as confirmation that the critique of spontaneity is not an act of spontaneity, but is "provoked in the subject, without the provocation ever becoming present or becoming a logos presenting itself to assumption or to refusal" (CP134/Ha82)? Consider the following passage from *Otherwise Than Being*:

Modern anti-humanism, which denies the primacy that the human person, free and an end in itself would have for the signification of being, is true *over and beyond the reasons it gives itself*. It clears a place for subjectivity positing itself in abnegation, in sacrifice, in a substitution which precedes the will. *Its inspired intuition* is to have abandoned the idea of person, goal and origin of itself.

(OB127/Ae164 modified translation; emphasis added)

The *philosophical* import of expressions such as "exceptional breath," "intuition," and "inspiration" is extremely vague however, and anyhow can hardly be said to account for the possibility of other non-subjective motivations and non-intentional processes at work, as though the world and humanity were not "will to power—and nothing besides"⁵⁶ (Nietzsche), as though "the world historical moment did not itself already compel such a reflection"⁵⁷ (Heidegger). Needless to say, an arbitrary interpretative arrangement would be particularly damaging in the case of Levinas's critical project because it would imply judgment based on preference or choice, and thereby reintroduce spontaneity into ethics *de jure* outside of choice, outside of freedom.⁵⁸ The problem of providing an ethical justification for anti-humanist critique is further aggravated by the fact that a straightforward appeal to a transcendental argument would also belie ethics insofar as it would erroneously put it back within the order of reasons, at the same time as presenting it as an indissoluble and simple origin.

It is rather a question of shifting terrain altogether, from philosophy to non-philosophy, without falling back into mere *doxa*, the traditional other of philosophy. Whereas in "Humanism and An-archy" Levinas sought to make the shift from anti-humanism to ethics at the level of philosophy, albeit through an incipient abusive linguistic register, in "No Identity" (1970), the third essay in *Humanisme de l'autre homme*, Levinas seeks to make the transition via an appeal to what he calls a rebellious and uncompromised "youth." I should like to present the rationale behind such an appeal in the next section in preparation for a final discussion connecting Levinas's remarks concerning philosophical critique with those he makes about skepticism.

III

The ethical category of youth in "No Identity" can be seen to meet a two-fold problematic. On the one hand, there is the need to illustrate a type of *ethical* discourse that stands outside philosophy, and therefore is not subject to its totalizing framework. Levinas refers to it as "Nietzschean" ("youth is a break in context, the trenchant, Nietzschean, prophetic word, without status in being" (CP151/Ha100)), partly because of its excess, its aggression, and its life-affirming capacity, and partly because of its innocence (*innocens*, without fault), the fact that it is not paralyzed by a sickening *ressentiment*. On the other hand, it enables Levinas to respond to the objection that the type of "alter-humanism"⁵⁹ he is advocating—"certainly an inwardness in its own way!" (CP150/Ha98)—would also be a target of anti-humanist criticism, one of the primary targets in fact. Levinas finds in the youthful attack against humanism not simply the occasion for positing ethical subjectivity anew, but an immediate expression of that very subjectivity. It is this that distinguishes it from non-philosophical discourse of an adiaphorous nature: "yet it is not arbitrary, for it has come from sincerity, that is, from responsibility for the other" (CP151/Ha100). Youth is sincere in its inability to keep silent in the face of human alienation and exploitation, in its inability *not* to respond, which is not "reactive" since there is *no* separation here between the famous "force and what it can do." According to Levinas "one can no longer say 'if youth only knew'" (CP151/Ha101).

It might be thought that Levinas's ethical categorization of youth as "man's humanity" (CP151/Ha101), does more than provide *anti*-humanism with "its own unexceptionable signification" (CP151/Ha101). It provides the model of ethical discourse in general. The philosophical text could at best proxy for the youthful denunciation of humanism by striving to become an ethical "saying" ("*le dire*") in turn, and at worst silence it altogether by congealing it into the ontological language of the "said" ("*le dit*"). Earlier in "No Identity," Levinas had gone so far as to suggest that philosophy was wholly incapable of ethical sincerity. "Inwardness," we are told, "is not something constructed in philosophy; it is the unreal reality of men persecuted in the daily history of the world, whose dignity and meaning metaphysics has never recognized, from which philosophers turn their faces" (CP150/Ha98). However incongruous with the description of "metaphysics" given in *Totality and Infinity*, and whatever the nature of the exception we must assume Levinas is prepared to make in the case of his own philosophy (and Plato, Descartes, *et al.*), such an outburst would appear to leave little role for philosophy in ethics beyond that of neglect and oversight.

That this presents only a one-sided view of philosophy is evident from the fact that it ignores the fundamental importance Levinas attaches to it as an interminable critique of the ontological conditions of its own enunciation. This critical "destructuring" is not merely negative; it has an important

positive aspect also. If Levinas does not follow the youthful rebellion to the point of renouncing philosophical discourse altogether, it is because thematization and the said are necessary for what he calls "justice":

One cannot do without them if one means to manifest to thought, even if one deforms it, what it beyond being itself . . . it is necessary for justice, which resigns itself to tradition, continuity and institutions, despite their very infidelity. To not care about them is to play with nihilism.

(CP151n11/Ha111n11)

I have attempted to show elsewhere the role of justice in Levinas's ethical theory, which has to do with the entry of the third party (*le tiers*), "a permanent entry into the intimacy of the face to face" (OB160/Ae204).⁶⁰ The important point to underline on this occasion is that the just exigency of a rational limit and measure on an originally unilateral and limitless responsibility, according to Levinas, justifies the *continuation* of philosophy at a time when the "philosopher artist" is more inclined toward the play of metaphor-catachreses than the representation of ideas, and provides philosophy with a task that the undermining of its own foundations and the pronouncement of its ineffaceable limits does not exhaust, yet it in no way eludes. A description of this task is provided in *Otherwise Than Being*.

In a dense passage at the end of the section entitled "From the Saying to the Said, or the Wisdom of Desire," Levinas writes:

Philosophy serves justice by thematizing the difference and reducing the thematized to difference. It brings equity into the abnegation of the one for the other, justice into responsibility. Philosophy, in its very diachrony, is the consciousness of the breakup of consciousness. In an alternating movement like that which leads from skepticism to the refutation that reduces it to the ashes, and from its ashes to its rebirth, philosophy justifies and criticizes the laws of being and the city, and finds again the signification that consists in detaching from the absolute one-for-the-other both the one and the other.

(OB165/Ae210)

Let us explain such a passage by considering Levinas's own diachronic philosophy as a case in point. A repeated objection put to Levinas is that the attempt to thematize the non-thematizable is contradictory, or if not contradictory exactly, then self-defeating in that the assemblage of terms and concepts in the unity of a system constitutes a *modus operandi* incompatible with its subject matter. It is pointed out, for example, that the other can only be represented as "other than the same," that is to say, can only be presented to philosophical discourse in the guise of what s/he is not, thereby compromising her/his absolute status.⁶¹ The objection is valid only on the

assumption that Levinas's philosophical discourse is a totalizing endeavor after all, an unsuccessful one at that, since it is incapable of conjoining the other and the same in a single discursive order without contradiction (e.g., "absolutely other" (TI39/Ti9), "relation without relation" (TI80/Ti52)). But this is to ignore the fact that Levinas's discourse would be anything but *philosophical* were it not to strive for coherence, and anything but *successful* were it to attain it. The problem is ill-posed if treated simply at the level of a methodic impasse. The impossibility of total synchronization is best recounted in terms that explicitly mark this impossibility as a *function of the otherwise than being itself*, something Levinas had already done in *Totality and Infinity*, for example, where the impossibility of thematizing the relation between the same and the other was said to derive from the fact that "he who would think it, or totalize it, would by this "reflection" mark a new scission in being since he would tell (*dirait*) this total to someone" (TI295/Ti271).

The irreducible *difference* between the saying and the said is given its most extensive treatment in *Otherwise Than Being*, only here it is not merely the enunciation *face to face* that marks a rupture of ontology, but the critical endeavor to conjoin the enunciated with its enunciative conditions in the present of writing (or memory). It is their very temporal irreducibility or "diachrony" within the text of philosophy itself that belies totalization and gives rise to contradiction: "the contradiction that should [*devrait*] compromise the signification of the beyond being—which evidently is not—is inoperative without a second time, *without reflection* on the condition of the statement that states this signification" (OB156/Ae198–199 modified translation). It is only insofar as consciousness critically undertakes—"after the event" (OB135/Ae173)—to retrace its steps by synchronizing the enunciated with the conditions of its enunciation in a single act of representation (or synthesizing "I think") that the contradiction "appears" (OB156/Ae199) in the sense of makes an *appearance*.⁶² This contradiction immediately presents itself to philosophical thinking as something to be canceled or "reduced." But it is not totally so, which since Hegel has meant its being raised to the level of "determinate negation." The diachronic structure of saying is precisely recalcitrant to the process of *Aufhebung* as a synchronization of different temporal moments in the contemporaneity of a system, a contumacy marked by the aporetic ("enigmatic") structure of what Levinas describes as a *trace*, through which responsibility signifies by maintaining the same and the other in their separation.

IV

It is in this context that Levinas draws an analogy between the saying that is belied by philosophical discourse, and an indefatigable "skepticism," refuted again and again by the philosophical *logos*, but which always returns

(historically speaking) to contest the possibility of truth anew. ("In an alternating movement like that which leads from skepticism to the refutation that reduces it to the ashes, and from its ashes to its rebirth" (OB165/Ae210 quoted earlier).) The contestation can indeed be shown to be self-contradictory, for the implicit affirmation *that* there is no truth presupposes that the negation is true. But skepticism, through its refusal to synchronize what is *said* and the *saying* of what said, shows itself to be undeterred by the refutation, or somehow manages to find extra-philosophical resources to abide it: "it is as though skepticism were sensitive to the difference between my exposure without reserve to the other, which is saying, and the exposition or statement of the said in its equilibrium and justice" (OB168/Ae213). Elsewhere in *Otherwise Than Being*, Levinas appeared to suggest that skepticism's affinity with ethics was closer still, more literal in fact:

the truth of what does not enter a theme is produced out of time or in two times without entering into either of them, as an endless critique—or *skepticism*—which in a spiraling movement makes possible the boldness of philosophy, destroying the conjunction into which its saying and its said enter.

(OB44/Ae57 my emphasis)

Is skepticism, then, another mode of what Levinas is calling "critique," an *instance* of saying rather than a model only?

It might be thought that this is untenable for the simple reason that critique in *Otherwise Than Being* is identified with philosophy—or at least philosophy in its most ethical self-interrogatory mode—whereas skepticism is said to be merely *inseparable* from philosophy (OB168/Ae213), indeed its "legitimate child."⁶³ As the "child" of philosophy, presumably skepticism is not the same as philosophy, though it is not entirely distinct from it either. Yet why "legitimate"? Does not skepticism's eternal return to the fold of philosophy precisely make it *illegitimate*? Is it not "born out of weird logic"? It has been suggested that Levinas is here drawing on the description already found in *Totality and Infinity*,⁶⁴ in which skepticism and philosophy are presented as correlatives of one another: "the true refers to the non-true, its eternal contemporary, and ineluctably meets with the smile and silence of the skeptic" (TI201/Ti175). In contesting truth, it is argued, skepticism is necessarily or negatively bound to the truth it contests, whose crown no pretender is deemed worthy of claiming. What Nietzsche said of atheism, "the awe-inspiring *catastrophe* of two thousand years of training in truthfulness that finally forbids itself the *lie involved in belief in God*,"⁶⁵ could equally be said of skepticism, which likewise forbids itself the fiction that is "truth" itself.

The weakness with this reading is that Levinas does not always present skepticism as a correlative of the search for truth. In *Otherwise Than Being*, Levinas is drawn to skepticism precisely *because* it presents a challenge to

the macrophagic resources of the *logos*, its capacity to envelop and combine everything that is foreign to it. The skeptical enunciation and the skeptical enunciation are radically noncombinative, and to that extent can only be thought at separate levels, short of the "breakup" of thought altogether. "To contest the possibility of truth is precisely to contest this uniqueness of order and level" (OB168/Ae214). Clearly Levinas does not consider the skeptical thesis immune from contestation in turn, as we have already seen. "The periodic rebirth of skepticism and its invincible and evanescent force to be sure does not permit us to confer any privilege on its said over against the implicit presuppositions of its saying" (OB171/Ae218). But the same could be said of critique itself, since here also "the truth of what does not enter a theme is produced out of time or in two times *without entering into either of them*."

Of course, Levinas does privilege critique over that which it contests: "as critique precedes dogmatism, metaphysics precedes ontology" (TI43/Ti13). Is skepticism, then, to be considered a species of *dogmatism*? Levinas does in fact say that "skepticism is insensitive [*insensible*] to the refutation" (OB168/Ae213), which could be taken to mean that skepticism's return to philosophy is a repeated act of *naïveté*, one wherein it is forgetful of the conditions of its own saying, or merely "slumbering." However, to understand skeptical discourse in these terms would be nothing less than a distortion of skepticism as it appears in the tradition.⁶⁶ The sense in which skepticism, on Levinas's account, involves a *self*-refutation is seriously misunderstood, I would argue, if taken to mean simply that it works against itself, or is unwittingly self-defeating. The self-contradictory nature of the negative judgment that there is no truth was explicitly recognized by the Pyrrhonian skeptics, who as physicians were more than prepared to take a dose of their own skeptical aperient. As Sextus Empiricus says in his *Pyrrhonic Sketches*: "for concerning all skeptical slogans it is necessary for this to be understood first of all: we absolutely do not firmly maintain anything about their being true, *especially when we say that they can be confuted by themselves*, as they are included among the cases to which they apply, just as cathartic drugs not only flush the bodily humors but expel themselves as well."⁶⁷ By turning its attention toward the refutation of appearance and dogmatism, and away from the impartation of truth, even that truth which denies the possibility of truth—"I am now in a such state of mind as neither dogmatically to affirm nor deny any of the matters in question"⁶⁸—Hellenistic skepticism held everything, including itself, to be *suspect*—a word whose Latin root is a metathetical alteration of the Greek "*skepsis*" ("seeking"). As Derrida, whose own work has been likened to "skepticism" (in conjunction with its refutation) by Levinas,⁶⁹ perceptively reminds us in *Memoirs of the Blind*,

before doubt ever becomes a system, *skepsis* has to do with the eyes. The word refers to visual perception, to the observation, vigilance, and

attention of the gaze. One is on the lookout, one reflects upon what one sees, reflects what one sees by delaying the moment of conclusion.⁷⁰

According to Sextus Empiricus, “the skeptics continue to search.”⁷¹ To what end? It seems to us that doing this brings an end to dogmatizing.”⁷²

Is not the *skeptical way* (*agoge*) of withholding assent (*epoche*), of the intellect’s being held back (*epechesthai*), and of provoking antinomies and conflict in assertions,⁷³ the same path taken by critique at the end of philosophy? Did not Kant himself liken “this method of watching,” where “reason is awakened to the consciousness of the factors [*Momente*] in the determination of its principles,”⁷⁴ to a “sober critique”?⁷⁵

Levinas does not use the term “skepticism” in “De la conscience à la veille,” though he does refer to the end of philosophy as a “vigilance,” “wakefulness”—and even “sobriety” (Dv35 *passim*). It is hardly novel, of course, to consider contemporary currents in philosophy as the re-emergence of skepticism in new, perhaps more “fashionable” guise. Yet the “refutations” that are commonly leveled at it—repeating the most traditional of gestures in the process—namely, the fact that it cannot help but refute *itself*, or that its seemingly limitless capacity for critical reserve (“undecidability”) paralyzes what is ordinarily called “agency” (understood in terms of the undiscussed value of spontaneity), in the context of Levinas’s philosophy constitute anything but grounds for rejecting it. The “skeptical return” coinciding with the end of philosophy, a self-refuting discourse in its attempt *per impossibile* to escape or “overcome” (Heidegger) the language and tropes of the tradition it criticizes, would here indicate an affiliation with “metaphysics” understood in an entirely different sense. Not the metaphysics of old, but that which is “older” still, or as Levinas says “prior to the negative and affirmative proposition . . . where neither no nor yes is the first word” (TI42/Ti12). Skepticism would constitute a “return” to *philosophia perennis* which “finds again the signification that consists in detaching from the absolute one-for-the-other both the one and the other” (OB165/Ae210 quoted earlier). And in the event that it does not to find it, then arguably it is not skeptical enough. It is slumbering.

It is only insofar as it falls short of absolute vigilance, or suffers from a diminution of skeptical reserve, that anti-humanism is treated with skepticism by Levinas. At the end of “Humanism and An-archy,” speaking of responsibility which is “not said in ontological categories,” Levinas invokes the Pyrrhonian *aphasia* (“non-assertion”) once more:

Modern anti-humanism is *perhaps not* right in *not* finding in man, lost in history and in order, the trace of this prehistorical and an-archival saying.

(CP139/Ha82 my emphasis)

To consider Levinas's equivocation as the result of an equipollence of the matters in question would be misleading.⁷⁶ Not only would it treat the said of anti-humanism and the "an-archival saying" of ethics as part of the same order, it would presuppose that saying could be thematized and treated as evidence (no matter how approximate) without thereby refuting *itself*. Levinas's skepticism derives from the fact that no philosophical said is capable of *saying* responsibility in its own terms, which invariably betray it. Hence his equivocal stance vis-à-vis not only the tradition but also the thinking that would seek to go beyond it, a thinking that cannot escape it entirely, caught as it is within its closure.

My aim has been to show this in the previous discussion. In the process I hope to have indicated the unique contribution Levinas presents to contemporary thought and post-Kantian critique in general. Doubtless more needs to be said about proximity and its relation to Pyrrhonism. "Proximity," Levinas writes, "signifies as a difference which, outside of all knowing, is non-indifference" (OB97/Ae123). What is the connection between this and the involuntary *pathe* that we are told threatened the "peace of mind" (ataraxy) and detachment of the ancient skeptics? What can provoke one to continue philosophizing when doing so invariably means falling back on the language of the tradition with no guarantee of overcoming the naïveté and dogmatism concealed within it? How does intellectual failure constitute moral failure? Why is it "of the highest importance to *know* (*savoir*) whether we are not duped by morality" (TI21/Tiix)? Levinas left these questions as a task of thinking in the wake of philosophy, wakening it from its slumbers once more.⁷⁷

Notes

- 1 F. Nietzsche, *The Will To Power*, trans. W. Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York, Random House, 1968), 575 (p. 309).
- 2 E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. A. Lingis (Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press, 1969), p. 85. *Totalité et Infini* (The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1961), p. 57. Henceforth TI and Ti respectively.
- 3 Nietzsche, *The Will To Power*, I (p. 7).
- 4 E. Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. A. Lingis (The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), p. 170. *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* (The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1974), p. 216. Henceforth OB and Ae respectively.
- 5 "Der Wille zur Wahrheit bedarf einer Kritik—bestimmen wir hiermit eine Aufgabe—der Wert der Wahrheit ist versuchsweise einmal in Frage zu stellen." F. Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, trans. W. Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York, Random House, 1989), III, 24 (p. 153). My emphasis.
- 6 Nietzsche, *The Will To Power*, 493 (p. 272).
- 7 I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. N. Kemp Smith (London, Macmillan, 1929), Prussian Academy pagination Bxxi note (p. 24 note). See also Bxvi (p. 22).
- 8 The present work was already in progress at the time of Levinas's death on December 25, 1995.
- 9 E. Levinas, "Transcendence and Height," in *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. R. Bernasconi, S. Critchley and A. Peperzak (Bloomington,

- Indiana University Press, 1996), pp. 11–31 (p. 31). “Transcendance et hauteur,” *Bulletin de la Société Française de Philosophie* 56:3 (1962): 91–113 (p. 113).
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 E. Levinas, “De la conscience à la veille,” *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée* (Paris, Vrin, 1989), pp. 34–61 (p. 35). Henceforth Dv.
- 12 E. Levinas, “Ideology and Idealism,” trans. S. Ames and A. Lesley, in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. S. Hand (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1989), pp. 235–48 (p. 237).
- 13 E. Levinas, “Humanism and An-archy,” *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. A. Lingis (The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), pp. 127–39 (p. 129). “Humanisme et anarchie,” *Humanisme de l'autre homme* (Montpellier, Fata Morgana, 1972), pp. 67–82 (p. 69). Henceforth CP and Ha respectively.
- 14 Cf. E. Levinas, *Time and the Other*, trans. R. Cohen (Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press, 1987), p. 42; 92. *Le Temps et l'autre* (Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1983), p. 20; 88. See also TI269/Ti247.
- 15 For the most insightful treatment to date, see R. Bernasconi, “Levinas: Philosophy and Beyond,” in H. J. Silverman, ed., *Continental Philosophy 1: Philosophy and Non-Philosophy since Merleau-Ponty* (New York and London, Routledge, 1988), pp. 232–58, esp. pp. 236–39.
- 16 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A11/B25 (p. 59).
- 17 “Ethics of the Infinite” interview, in R. Kearney, ed., *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1984), pp. 47–69 (p. 69).
- 18 J. Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas,” *Writing and Difference*, trans. A. Bass (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul), 1978, pp. 79–153. Cf. especially pp. 134ff.
- 19 According to Levinas, the engagement with the openness of being constitutes a reduction of particularity and difference, delivering the other over to regimes of identity thinking and praxis: “Heideggerian ontology, which subordinates the relationship with the Other to the relation with Being in general, remains under obedience to the anonymous, and leads inevitably to another power, to imperialist domination, to tyranny” (TI46–47/Ti17). I broach Levinas’s criticism of ethical neutrality later, though in the present context it should be noted that Levinas is not concerned with giving a “rounded” picture of Heidegger’s philosophy (provided elsewhere), but is using it principally as a foil for his own conception of what is metaphysics. See Levinas’s concession to Heidegger’s language later in *Totality and Infinity*: “The other qua other is the Other. To ‘let him be’ the relationship of discourse is required” (TI71/Ti42–43).
- 20 While the English translation reproduces an ambiguity present in the original French concerning the pronominal object “Elle,” which could possibly refer to “metaphysics,” I take the most likely candidate in the context to be “theory.”
- 21 Cf. T. De Boer, “An Ethical Transcendental Philosophy,” in R. Cohen, ed., *Face to Face with Levinas* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), pp. 83–115. For a contrastive reading, see R. Bernasconi, “Rereading *Totality and Infinity*,” in A. B. Dallery and C. E. Scott, eds., *The Question of the Other* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), pp. 23–34. Much of what follows has been informed by Bernasconi’s essay in particular.
- 22 R. Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* (“Third Meditation”), from *Descartes: Selected Philosophical Writings*, trans. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, and D. Murdoch (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 94. Quoted by Levinas TI211/Ti187.
- 23 F. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. W. Kaufmann (New York, Random House, 1974), III, 275 (p. 220).

- 24 Is this the *ens perfectissimum* Descartes called God? Despite his borrowing the language of the Infinite from Descartes, I read Levinas as denying it: "the atheism of the metaphysician means that our relation with the Metaphysical is an ethical behavior and not theology" (TI78/Ti50). "Desire, an aspiration that does not proceed from a lack—metaphysics—is the desire of a person" (TI299/Ti275). I am aware that Levinas is not usually read in such atheistic terms, though it may be surmised that such a reading is closer in spirit to Levinas's thinking than a tendency among many of his readers to regard ethics as requiring a religious countenance, albeit one that *hides itself*. If not, then Levinas's ethics appears to lose its radicality, for ethics would not then be "for nothing," it would be conditional upon the *truth* of the claim that God is concealed, which to the extent that it could just as well be false, and God not exist at all (indistinguishable from "concealment" itself), would make all ethical responsibilities arbitrary commitments, or expressions of the "desire to believe" in Nietzsche's sense.
- 25 Cf. *Totality and Infinity*: "The idea of infinity is revealed, in the strong sense of the term. There is no natural religion" (TI62/Ti33). Although, see TI211/Ti186.
- 26 Cf. E. Levinas, "No Identity," *Collected Philosophical Papers*, pp. 141–51 (p. 147). "Sans Identité," *Humanisme de l'autre homme*, pp. 85–101 (p. 94). Also, "Outside the Subject," *Outside the Subject*, trans. M. B. Smith (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1993), pp. 151–158 (p. 157). "Hors sujet," *Hors sujet* (Montpellier, Fata Morgana, 1987), pp. 223–36 (p. 234).
- 27 G. W. F. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, vol. II, trans. A. V. Miller (New York, Humanities Press, 1969), p. 584.
- 28 In *Otherwise Than Being* we read: "Kantianism is the basis of philosophy, if philosophy is ontology" (OT179/Ae226). Of course, denying the antecedent does not logically entail the denial of the consequent. In the exceptional capacity of critique, Kantianism might still be said to lie at the basis of philosophy understood otherwise than as ontology.
- 29 For a discussion connecting Levinas's and Kant's ethics, see P. Atterton, "The Proximity Between Levinas and Kant: The Primacy of Practical Reason" (forthcoming).
- 30 Levinas, "La Pensée de l'être," *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée*, pp. 173–88 (p. 180).
- 31 E. Husserl, "Philosophy as a Rigorous Science," trans. Q. Lauer, in *Edmund Husserl: Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy* (New York, Harper & Row, 1965), pp. 69–147 (p. 85).
- 32 The "'beginning of the end' of philosophy" is the inchoate "denunciation" of the errancy of previous thinking *which nevertheless continues to inveigle it and all thinking to follow*. As we will see when examining Levinas's account of philosophy from *Otherwise Than Being*, a work contemporary with the passage just cited, the critical end of philosophy is a beginning without end. As part of an ongoing effort to interrogate ever more stringently the self-evidence of its founding concepts and language, such thinking never reaches its end, or origin, never lifts the final "mask" (body, language, history) to disclose the unconditioned "truth" or transcendental signified. "Presence" (i.e., immediate self-presence of consciousness), to deploy a Derridian idiom, is perpetually postponed, and so is the end of philosophy (as completion or fulfillment), insofar as it can never short-circuit the mediation of the sign in general.
- 33 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Axi–xiii (p. 10).
- 34 G. Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. H. Tomlinson (London, Athlone, 1983), p. 91.
- 35 I. Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals (The Moral Law)*, trans. H. J. Paton (London, Hutchinson, 1948), Prussian Academy pagination 463 (p. 123).

- 36 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A796/B824 (p. 629).
- 37 Ibid., A805/B833 (p. 635).
- 38 I. Kant, *Logic*, trans. R. S. Hartman and W. Swarz (Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill, 1974), Prussian Academy pagination 26 (p. 29).
- 39 M. Blanchot, "Our Clandestine Companion," trans. D. Allison, in *Face to Face with Levinas*, pp. 41–50 (p. 44).
- 40 Levinas, "Avant-propos," *Humanisme de l'autre homme*, pp. 11–15 (p. 11).
- 41 Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 115 (p. 70).
- 42 M. Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," trans. F. A. Capuzzi, in collaboration with J. Glenn Gray and D. F. Krell, in *Basic Writings*, ed. D. F. Krell (London, Routledge, 1978), pp. 193–242. In this essay Heidegger maintains that the traditional (under-)valuation of "man" goes back to the Roman *animal rationale*, a metaphysical interpretation of the Greek *zoon logon echon*, whereby the essence of man, thought in terms of a present-at-hand substance (animal), is determined ontically, i.e., in terms of some distinct quality or superior endowment (the faculty of reason) that separates man from all other beings. Thus, *humanitas* becomes something to aspire towards, a merit separating humans from the rest of nature, evidenced in the Roman distinction between *homo humanus* and *homo barbarus*, where *humanus* is equated with the *paideia*, or education, associated with the scholarship and training of Hellenistic culture. Such an ideal is reborn in the Renaissance of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and in German Romanticism of the eighteenth century (Goethe and Schiller). In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the predominant metaphysical concern still rests with man, notwithstanding that it is no longer a question of a return to antiquity, but rather an overriding interest of the realization of secular freedom (freeing man's true nature, *humanitas*), whether it be tied to the interests of a particular class or society (classical Marxism), or the private world of the individual (Sartrean existentialism).
- 43 Ibid., p. 210. One wonders, of course, what "dignity" and "high enough" (*hoch genug*) could possibly mean in the context of an opposition to humanism and in view of the claim made later in the essay that "every valuing, even where it values positively, is a subjectivizing" (p. 228). Here we would appear to have evidence yet again of the veracity of Heidegger's assertion that "whatever and however we may try to think, we think within the sphere of the tradition." M. Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, trans. J. Stambaugh (New York, Harper & Row, 1969), p. 41.
- 44 M. Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," p. 210.
- 45 The crisis goes back to a non-anthropological reading of Marx (i.e., post *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844), wherein the individual is seen as subject to an ideology reflecting the relations of production and economic determinations of social formations. More crucial philosophically are the writings of Nietzsche and Freud, where the emphasis is placed on the interplay of unconscious instincts, desires and forms of language in relation to which the human will and consciousness present themselves as a surface effect or symptom. With the rise of human sciences (part of metaphysics in its terminal phase according to Heidegger), structuralism in particular, the idea of a self-identical subject hearkening to itself in the interiority the cogito, generating its own meanings and evaluations, is definitively laid to rest. Man, the proud though unavowed invention of European metaphysics itself, would appear to be nearing his end.
- 46 Such an argument, it will be recalled, was already used in *Totality and Infinity*, and issued in one of the work's most important conclusions: "Multiplicity

therefore implies an objectivity posited in the impossibility of total reflection, in the impossibility of conjoining the I with the non-I in a whole" (TI221/Ti196).

- 47 Levinas's reservations concerning materialism go back to *Existence and Existents* (1947), where it was associated with the horrifying *il y a*, the impersonal order of Being: "matter is the very fact of the *there is* . . . Horror is somehow a movement which will strip consciousness of its very 'subjectivity.'" *Existence and Existents*, trans. A. Lingis (The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1978), pp. 57 & 60. *De l'existence à l'existence* (Paris, Vrin, 1986), pp. 92 & 98. The sentiments expressed here are those which reverberate in the final pages of *Totality and Infinity* where Levinas launches an attack against what he calls the "philosophy of the Neuter," directly associated with the work of Hegel and Heidegger, both of whom are said to "exalt an obedience that no face commands" (TI298/Ti275). However, Levinas's use of the term "matter" in the passage just quoted shows him to be launching a multi-pronged attack against what he sees as the neutral character of post-Kantian discourse in general. While the term had certainly been used in a similar context in *Totality and Infinity* ("Materialism does not lie in the discovery of the primordial function of sensibility, but in the primacy of the Neuter" (TI298/Ti275)), it is clear that on this occasion Levinas also has in mind structuralism and post-structuralism, and, most importantly, the work of Nietzsche (despite Nietzsche's own misgivings about the term "matter" (*Will to Power*, 689, p. 368)). The depiction of the human will—"the last link in the chain" (ibid., 664, p. 352)—as a resolution of unconscious or "subterranean" forces welling from the anonymous matrix of "will to power," governed only by the bi-polarity of active and reactive, serves as perhaps the most telling example of this reduction of the human to the "nonhuman" (CP130/Ha70). And yet, Levinas's reservations regarding the diverse discourses of anti-humanism concern the cultural space in which those discourses unfold as much as the theoretical tenets of the discourses themselves. Thus, in "Humanism and Anarchy," we are alerted to "the counter-sense of the vast enterprises that have failed, in which politics and technology end up negating the projects that conducted them, [which] teaches the inconsistency of man, plaything of his own works" (CP127/Ha67). The reification and the reduction of reason to means-ends rationality, totalitarianism and exploitation, atomic and micro-biological warfare, signal the end of the "human, all too human," or Enlightenment ideal, of progress, while making all the more urgent the need for a sober reflection that will not settle for anything less: "Over against the universality of structures and the impersonal essence of being, over against the reciprocal relativity of the points in a system, a point that counts for itself is needed, a cell sober in the midst of the 'Bacchic delirium in which no member escapes intoxication'" (CP130/Ha71).
- 48 E. Levinas, "Signature," trans. A. Peperzak, *Research in Phenomenology* 8 (1978): 175–89 (p. 189). "Signature," *Difficile* (Paris, Albin Michel, 1976), pp. 403–12 (p. 412).
- 49 Cf. J. Llewelyn, *The Middle Voice of Ecological Conscience: A Chiasmic Reading of Responsibility in the Neighbourhood of Levinas, Heidegger and Others* (London, Macmillan, 1991).
- 50 M. Scheler, *Formalism in Ethics and Non-Formal Ethics of Value*, trans. M. S. Frings and R. L. Funk (Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 372.
- 51 Cf. Levinas's remark in *Totality and Infinity*: "The role Kant attributed to sensible experience in the domain of the understanding belongs in metaphysics to interhuman relations" (TI79/T51).

- 52 It is arguably this that allows Levinasian respect to "escape empirical and pathological immediacy," the necessity of avoiding which Derrida had already urged in "Violence and Metaphysics," p. 314, n. 26.
- 53 Levinas alludes to the proximity between his and Kant's thinking here at CP138/Ha82. Cf. also the final paragraph of chapter 5 ("Substitution") in *Otherwise Than Being*, p. 129.
- 54 I. Kant, *The Doctrine of Virtue* (Part II of *The Metaphysic of Morals*), trans. M. Gregor (New York, Harper & Row, 1964), Prussian Academy pagination, 222 (p. 22).
- 55 This "beyond," the surplus of ethical responsibility, is alluded to in connection with Zarathustra's "Prologue" ("man is a bridge and not a goal"). F. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Middlesex, Penguin, 1969), p. 44. Levinas invokes Zarathustra's "love" of him who willingly lays himself down or sacrifices himself to make way for *der Übermensch* as an illustration of ethical susceptibility. See the epigraph to "Humanism and Anarchy," from Zarathustra's "Prologue": "*Ich liebe den, dessen Seele uebervoll ist, so dass er sich selber vergisst, und alle Dinge in ihm sind: so werden alle Dinge sein Untergang*" (HA127/Ha67). ("I love him whose soul is overfull, so that he forgets himself and all things are in him: thus all things become his downfall" [p. 45]). Levinas alludes to the latter once more at the end of the essay (HA139/Ha82).
- 56 Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, p. 550.
- 57 Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," p. 225.
- 58 Cf. Levinas remark in "Is Ontology Fundamental?" "One cannot oppose personal preference to the tradition that Heidegger continues. One cannot *prefer* as the condition of ontology a relation with a being over the fundamental thesis that every relation with a being presupposes the nearness or the forgetfulness of being" (trans. P. Atterton). *Philosophy Today* 33 (1989): 124. "L'Ontologie est-elle fondamentale?", *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 56 (1951): 88–98 (p. 92).
- 59 I borrow this term from John Llewelyn, *Emmanuel Levinas: The Genealogy of Ethics* (London, Routledge, 1995), p. 178.
- 60 "Levinas and the Language of Peace: A Response to Derrida," *Philosophy Today* 36 (1992): 59–70.
- 61 Cf. Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," especially pp. 126–27.
- 62 My interpretation here clearly diverges from that put forwards by Jan De Greef in "Skepticism and Reason" (*Face to Face with Levinas*, pp. 159–79), for whom the contradiction is "only apparent and, hence, non-existent" (p. 160).
- 63 Note that "*enfant légitime*" (Ae9; 108n18; 231) is mistakenly rendered in the English translation as "*illegitimate child*" (OB7) and "*bastard child*" (OB192n18; 183).
- 64 R. Bernasconi, "Skepticism in the Face of Philosophy," in R. Bernasconi and S. Critchley, eds., *Re-Reading Levinas* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1991), pp. 149–61 (p. 151).
- 65 Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, III, 27 (p. 160).
- 66 After Pyrrho of Elis, who taught the suspension of judgment (*epoche*) and non-affirmation (*aphasia*), skepticism came to be understood in the "New Academy" principally as a revolt against the rashness of the so-called "Dogmatists." When a more radical form of "Pyrrhonian" skepticism emerged later, it was as a reaction to Academic skepticism itself, whose untoward readiness to avail itself of the *negative* proposition was considered as dogmatic as the Stoicism it criticized (into which Antiochus is indeed said to have transformed it). See A. A. Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy* (New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1974.) I am aware that Levinas nowhere appears concerned with the details of the history of skepticism.

- As R. Bernasconi has pointed out, who insists "Levinas is giving skepticism and its refutation the status of a metaphor or 'model.' He is not adopting a skeptical position" ("Skepticism in the Face of Philosophy," p. 150). See "Façon de parler," *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée*, pp. 266–70 (p. 268).) Although I do not consider Levinas to adopt a skeptical position either, the reading I am proposing here submits there may be grounds for considering the relation between Levinas's *conception of philosophy* (critique) and skepticism, at least as a *method*, to be closer than Bernasconi, and perhaps even Levinas himself, suggests.
- 67 Sextus Empiricus, *The Skeptic Way: Sextus Empiricus's Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, trans. B. Mates (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996), I, 28 (p. 117).
- 68 Ibid., I, 23 (p. 115).
- 69 Cf. E. Levinas, "Wholly Otherwise," trans. S. Critchley, in *Re-Reading Levinas*, pp. 3–10 (p. 5); "Tout autrement," *Noms Propres* (Paris, Fata Morgana, 1976), pp. 65–72 (p. 69); also "Ethics of the Infinite" interview, p. 22.
- 70 J. Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 1.
- 71 Sextus Empiricus, *The Skeptic Way*, I, 1 (p. 89).
- 72 Ibid., I, 6 (p. 90).
- 73 Ibid., I, 22 (p. 115).
- 74 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A486/B514 (p. 436).
- 75 Ibid., A423–24/B451–52 (p. 395). See also A507/B535 (p. 449).
- 76 For a discussion of Levinas cultivated use of the adverb "perhaps" and related expressions elsewhere, see J. Derrida, "At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am," trans. R. Berezdivin, in *Re-Reading Levinas*, pp. 11–48 (p. 23).
- 77 My thanks to William Nericcio, David Webb, and Mark Wheeler, whose critical comments and suggestions in connection with an earlier version of this essay proved invaluable.

REREADING *TOTALITY AND INFINITY*

Robert Bernasconi

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It is now more than twenty-five years since the publication of Emmanuel Levinas's *Totality and Infinity*.¹ During that time certain habits of reading have been established. The focus has come to fall on the thirty pages that open its third part. In consequence, *Totality and Infinity* is known as a book about ethics, and it is often thought that if one wants to engage Levinas, it is sufficient to address the idea that the face-to-face relation provides the foundation for ethics.² How far that widespread impression is justified is too large a question for me to entertain today. I mention it only as a prelude to the question that has most preoccupied discussion about Levinas. The question is: what status is to be accorded the face-to-face relation? Here interpretations diverge. Some interpreters understand it as a concrete experience that we can recognize in our lives. Other commentators have understood the face-to-face relation to be the condition for the possibility of ethics and indeed of all economic existence and knowledge. If the first interpretation arises from what might be called an empirical reading, the second might be referred to as the transcendental reading. The puzzle is that Levinas himself seems unable to decide between these rival interpretations. Although in response to critics who have found his thought utopian he has insisted that the face-to-face relation can be experienced, he has also authorized the transcendental reading, as, for example, when in answer to a question put to him by the Dutch philosopher Theodore de Boer, he agreed that his thought was "a transcendentalism which starts with ethics."³

It should be noted, before accepting this division between an empirical and a transcendental reading of *Totality and Infinity*, that Levinas himself often hesitates before the very terms which characterize them. For example, in the preface to *Totality and Infinity*, the application of the word *experience*

is put in question, so long as it is standardly understood: "The relation with infinity cannot, to be sure, be stated in terms of experience, for infinity overflows the thought that thinks it . . . but if experience precisely means a relation with the absolutely other, that is, with what always overflows thought, the relation with infinity accomplishes experience in the fullest sense of the word" (TI 25; TeI xiii). Similarly, and on the very same page, Levinas shows his uneasiness before the word *transcendental*, to which he nevertheless appeals: "The way we are describing to work back and remain this side of objective certitude *resembles* what has come to be called the transcendental method . . ." (emphasis added). The word *resembles* is the key here because by it Levinas attempts to distance himself from the common conception of the transcendental method. His reservations are explained some years later when, in the same place that Levinas gives his positive answer to de Boer's question about an ethical transcendentalism, he questions its association with the search for foundations (DVI 141). But then what is to be made of his claim that the face-to-face relation is the foundation of ethics?

There are further problems in supposing that Levinas is seeking to reconcile the motifs of transcendental philosophy with an appeal to experience. Levinas made it clear when he designated the face-to-face as an experience that this was possible only because the face of the Other ruptures what is ordinarily called experience. But can transcendental thinking survive such a rupture? Does not the very process of tracking the transcendental conditions of experience require that a continuous path be drawn between experience and its condition? In other words, can a transcendental thinking maintain the thought of transcendence? Levinas answers this question and shows the way in which his thought only *resembles* the transcendental method in the following passage: "We can proceed from the experience of totality back to a situation where totality breaks up, a situation that conditions the totality itself" (TI 24; TeI xiii). It might be said in consequence that the conditions for the possibility of the experience of totality are at the same time the conditions for the impossibility of the experience of totality, in the sense that the rupture with totality shows that there never was a totality. And the totality is ruptured by what Levinas calls *exteriority*, the transcendence in the face of the Other. Levinas follows the transcendental method to the point where it is halted and in order to sustain itself must draw on that which is radically exterior to it. This exteriority is itself therefore the condition both for that which had been revealed in transcendental thought and for transcendental thought itself.

This is what allows Levinas to say that the "'beyond' the totality and objective experience . . . is reflected *within* the totality and history, *within* experience" (TI 23; TeI xi). And, at the risk of repeating what is already familiar, that is why the terms of the title *Totality and Infinity* are not opposed in such a way as to mean totality *versus* infinity. If the *infinite*, Levinas's word adopted from Descartes for that which breaks with the totality,

was simply opposed to the totality, this would allow for their reintegration, according to a logic learned from Hegel, addressed by Levinas in *Totality and Infinity* (TI 53; TeI 23–24) and taken up again by Jacques Derrida in “Violence and Metaphysics.”⁴ Levinas elaborates on this path—insufficiently acknowledged by most commentators—in the following passage: “Between a philosophy of transcendence . . . and a philosophy of immanence . . . we propose to describe, within the unfolding of terrestrial existence, of economic existence (as we shall call it), a relationship with the other that does not result in a divine or human totality, that is not a totalization of history but the idea of infinity” (TI 52; TeI 23). The proposal underlies both the claim that the infinite in the finite is produced as desire (TI 50; TeI 21) and the claim that doing and labor are said to imply the relation with the transcendent (TI 109; TeI 81). But in what sense can it be said that labor implies a relation with the transcendent? As I shall try to show later, the attempt to answer that question occupies Levinas in section 2 of *Totality and Infinity*, under the title “Interiority and Economy.”

The empirical and transcendental readings of *Totality and Infinity* provide the terms for almost every introduction to Levinas’s thought, and I have so far discussed them only in their most elementary form; they also lie at the heart of more highly articulated readings. The empirical reading of *Totality and Infinity* need not just amount to an insistence that the face-to-face is a concrete experience. At the end of “Violence and Metaphysics,” Derrida offers the verdict that there is in Levinas a renewal and inversion of empiricism “with an audacity, a profundity, and a resoluteness never before attained” (WD 151; ED 225). Levinas is said to have accomplished this by revealing empiricism to be also (what *he* calls) metaphysics. Derrida finds evidence for this complicity also in Kant, Husserl, Schelling, and Bergson, and this in spite of the fact that empiricism has always been determined by philosophy as philosophy’s other, as nonphilosophy. And yet this empiricism, which appears to be opposed to philosophy, is, on closer examination, shown to call for it: “Nothing can so profoundly *solicit* the Greek logos—philosophy—than this irruption of the totally-other” (WD 152; ED 226). And so Derrida’s admiration for Levinas turns to a questioning. This questioning focuses on the concept of experience itself and on Levinas’s alleged attempt to break with Greek philosophy (and not simply to interrupt it). Early in the essay Derrida had suggested that Levinas appeals to experience against the Greek logos: Levinas’s thought “by remaining faithful to the immediate, but buried nudity of experience itself, seeks to liberate itself from the Greek domination of the Same and the One . . . as if from oppression itself— . . . an ontological or transcendental oppression”⁵ (WD 82–83; ED 122–23). But by the end of the essay Derrida was ready to pose at least as a question the possibility that the word *experience* had “always been determined by the metaphysics of presence,” so that experience was “always an encountering of an irreducible presence” (WD 152; ED 225). It should be

observed that these questions were not simply rhetorical. Derrida, unlike some of his followers, does not suppose that there is a language of metaphysics as such. In fact, earlier in the essay he had drawn on Levinas's recently published essays on the trace to acknowledge the possibility of an experience exceeding these limits: the beyond history is "present at the heart of experience," and yet it is "present not as a total presence but as a *trace*" (WD 95; ED 142).

At this point it ceases to be clear how Derrida conceives Levinas's renewal and inversion of empiricism. The uncertainty is fostered at least in part by the ambiguity of the word *metaphysics*. It is almost as though Derrida were suggesting that Levinas had accomplished the renewal of empiricism in spite of himself. Levinas had turned to a radical empiricism (which he also called "metaphysics") in an unsuccessful attempt to break with the tradition of Western philosophy, which he called *ontology* and which Derrida—following Heidegger—continued to call "metaphysics." Derrida, however, would find in the failure of this attempt an incidence of the law proposed throughout "Violence and Metaphysics," that it is necessary to lodge oneself within traditional conceptuality in order to destroy it (WD 111; ED 165). The complicity that Derrida finds between metaphysics and empiricism (as philosophy's other) exemplifies that law. The question is whether Levinas was as unsuspecting of it as Derrida, in places in the essay, seems to suggest. The interweaving of the transcendental and empirical motifs might offer some evidence that he was not.

The main proponent of the transcendental reading is de Boer in his important essay, "An Ethical Transcendental Philosophy."⁶ De Boer specifies the dangers to which this characterization might give rise: for example, the suspicion that such a philosophy must be based on the indubitable certainty of the *ego cogito* (FFL 83). Instead he proposes to model his account of the "transcendental" relation of the same to the other on Levinas's reading of the Cartesian idea of infinity (FFL 95). I shall question this attempt to separate the Cartesian *cogito* from the Cartesian idea of the infinite later. De Boer is on more solid ground when he explains that by an ethical transcendental philosophy he does not mean "a universal, impersonal, and necessary structure, which can be reconstructed out of the phenomena," in line with traditional transcendental philosophy (FFL 100). The transcendental condition is "not a necessary ontological structure that can be reconstructed from the empirical phenomena." But can the face as the object of transcendental cognition be designated "an unrecoverable contingent or ontic incidence that intersects the ontological order," as de Boer suggests (FFL 108)? Levinas had always sought to distance himself from Heidegger's determination of the ontological difference and the related distinction between the existential and the existentiell, because he saw in them "an insidious form of the impersonal neuter" (TI 272; TeI 250). Their reintroduction here is therefore problematic. Furthermore, they represent an empirical moment

at the heart of de Boer's attempt to sustain the transcendental reading. So at one point de Boer writes that "the transcendental condition is an ethical experience enacted in discourse" (FFL 97). And yet de Boer holds back from the conclusion to which this interpretation appears to lead, when he adds that "the condition for the possibility of experience is not experience itself" (FFL 105). De Boer, having at one point hinted at the conjunction of the transcendental and empirical readings, leaves their interrelation unclear. The difficulty in which de Boer finds himself is not accidental, as I shall try to show.

Unlike many commentators on Levinas, de Boer does not ignore the section of *Totality and Infinity* entitled "Interiority and Economy," but it has even more significance for the question at hand than perhaps even he recognizes. It is in the second part of *Totality and Infinity* that Levinas specifically addresses the interrelation between the transcendental and the empirical. I shall devote the remainder of my paper to this section. As a result I will be unable to give a direct answer to the question I raised earlier about the status Levinas gives to his account of the face-to-face. But I would claim that only through an examination of this second section are we in a position to understand how Levinas prepares his answer.

The second part of *Totality and Infinity* is concerned with labor and objectifying thought as relations *analogous* to transcendence (TI 109; TeI 81). And yet these relations analogous to transcendence "already imply the relation with the transcendent," the relation to the other. Levinas must therefore pursue the twofold task of, first, showing the difference between transcendent relations and relations analogous to transcendence and, secondly, showing the former to be reflected within the latter. Levinas is quite explicit that this can be accomplished in conformity with neither the classical logic of noncontradiction, "where the other of A is the negation of A," nor the dialectical logic, "where the same participates in and is reconciled with the other in the unity of a system" (TI 150; TeI 124). In both cases the transcendent relation cannot be maintained. What Levinas finds in his analyses is the "interval of separation." The notion of separation breaks with the ordinary understanding of relation. Whereas we ordinarily understand by *relation* "a simultaneity of distance between the terms and their union," in separation "the being that is in relation absolves itself from the relation, is absolute within the relationship" (TI 110; TeI 82). Separation as inner life, as psychism, the interiority of a presence at home with oneself, habitation and economy, already exhibits the distance that resists totalization.

Throughout this discussion Levinas uses Husserl and Heidegger as foils. More specifically, and it is confirmed by the opening sentences of the section, Husserl is characterized as being concerned primarily with the intentional relation as a thematic or objectifying relation with an object, whereas Heidegger is understood primarily in terms of the account of Being-in-the-world to be

found in the first division of *Being and Time*. Levinas is not unaware that he oversimplifies these two thinkers and that he could have found other resources in their writings which might have been closer to his own concerns. He was, for example, in the course of publishing a series of articles in which he showed Husserl to have gone far beyond intentionality in its classic sense, but in these sections he is content to confine himself to Husserl's "obsession" with representation (TI 122; TeI 95). Similar reservations could be expressed about his treatment of Heidegger, but again the distortion must be judged with reference to its underlying purpose.

In the first instance, Levinas's question is whether the structures that Husserl and Heidegger employ do justice to the character of enjoyment. Levinas suggests that neither the primacy of the representational act as proposed by Husserl, nor the dominance of the "in-order-to" which Heidegger developed in *Being and Time* in the course of his discussion of equipmentality, can account for what Levinas analyzes under the name *vivre de* or "living from." Enjoyment is not something added on to life subsequently, like the addition of an attribute to a substance. Rather "life is *love of life*" (TI 112; TeI 84). As a polemical reply to Heidegger's conception of *Sorge* as care, this would amount to no more than the substitution of one ideal of existence for another. But Levinas's aim extends further. He claims that "the reality of life . . . is beyond ontology" (TI 112; TeI 84); or, in the same vein, "To be I is to exist in such a way as to be already beyond being, in happiness" (TI 120; TeI 92). That happiness is beyond being and not an accident of being is shown, he suggests, by the fact that being is risked for happiness (TI 112; TeI 84). And in spite of the distinction between need and desire with which the first part began, the realm of needs—to which happiness belongs—already transports us "outside the categories of being" (TI 115; TeI 87), categories such as activity and passivity, means and ends. Need, by virtue of *having* time and postponing dependence, is thus found to rest on desire. The unicity, solitude, isolation, and withdrawal of happiness and need already rupture the totality (TI 118; TeI 90). Needs "constitute a being independent of the world, a veritable subject" (TI 116; TeI 89).

If the first section of part 2 serves largely to introduce the notion of enjoyment, it is in the second section, "Enjoyment and Separation," that it is put to work. In this section Levinas examines, in isolation from each other, first representation and then enjoyment, before proceeding to exhibit their interdependency. "Detached from its sources," "taken in itself, as it were uprooted" (TI 123; TeI 96), the exteriority of the object appears to be a meaning ascribed by the representing subject. That is to say, reflection reveals the object as a work of thought (TI 125; TeI 97). Alterity disappears in the same. "The distinction between me and the object, between interior and exterior, is effaced" (TI 124; TeI 96).

By contrast, the intentionality of enjoyment maintains the exteriority that representation suspends. It thus follows a different structure. Whereas in

representation “the same is in relation with the other but in such a way that the other does not determine the same” (TI 124; TeI 97), in enjoyment “the same determines the other while being determined by it” (TI 128; TeI 101). Whereas representation conforms to the model of adequation, enjoyment overflows its meaning. The maintenance of the exteriority characteristic of enjoyment is accomplished by the body, which is the reversion of representation into life. The needs of the body “affirm ‘exteriority’ as non-constituted, prior to all affirmation” (TI 127; TeI 100). The structure of enjoyment is therefore an offense against the transcendental method, which in Levinas’s mind is closely tied to representation. The language of transcendental conditions is turned upside down: “The aliment conditions the very thought that would think it as a condition” (TI 128; TeI 101). The constituted becomes the condition of the constituting. Corporeity as both affirmation of exteriority and position on the earth contests the transcendental method and its reliance on the universality of representation and the directionality of constitution. “The world I constitute nourishes me and bathes me. It is aliment and ‘medium’ (*milieu*). The intentionality aiming at the exterior changes direction in the course of its very aim by becoming interior to the exteriority it constitutes, somehow comes from the point to which it goes, recognizing itself past in its future, lives from what it thinks” (TI 129; TeI 102). In a formulation that anticipates the notion of the trace, Levinas writes:

A movement radically different from thought is manifested when the constitution by thought finds its condition in what it has freely welcomed or refused, when the represented turns into a past that had not traversed the *present* of representation, as an absolute past not receiving its meaning from memory.

(TI 130; TeI 103)

The represented, the present, already belongs to the past as a fact.

The subsequent paragraphs of the second section of part 2 are devoted to making more explicit what it is that challenges representation in this way. Levinas refers to the element or medium from which things come to representation (TI 130; TeI 103). To understand things as emerging from and returning to the elemental is, Levinas maintains, to challenge the attempt to absorb things into a system of operational references, the “technical finality” of the Heideggerian world. This he does without reference to Heidegger’s interpretation of *phusis* to which it more closely approximates. Indeed, in *Otherwise than Being; or, Beyond Essence* Levinas collapses the differences between the Husserlian and Heideggerian accounts and accuses Heidegger of maintaining a commitment to “the founding primacy of cognition.”⁷ Levinas thus locates a latent representationalism in Heidegger’s account of projection. And he does so in spite of Heidegger’s challenge to the priority of knowledge in section 13 of *Being and Time*. Levinas was not unaware of

this discussion. It had provided him in his 1930 dissertation, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, with the basis of his criticism of Husserl's thesis on the priority of presentifying acts.⁸ But meanwhile he had come to believe that the "ancient thesis that puts representation at the basis of every practical behavior" is "too hastily discredited" (TI 94; TeI 67).

When Levinas complains that Heidegger does not take enjoyment into account, when he observes that *Dasein* is never hungry and that an ontology which classifies food as an implement is true only for a world of exploitation (TI 134; TeI 108), he is not primarily confronting Heidegger at the level of description. At the level of description, there will be times when exploitation is indeed dominant. Levinas is rather recalling a discussion in *Existence and Existents*, where the notions of both intentionality and of ontological finality were judged insufficiently penetrating. In *Existence and Existents*, the notion of the "sincerity" of intentions is prominent. Levinas drew attention to an absorption in the desirable from which the care for existence is absent. Levinas commented, "It is not really true to say that we eat in order to live, we eat because we are hungry."⁹ In *Totality and Infinity*, the focus shifts to the notion of enjoyment, but it is only a matter of emphasis: "If I eat my bread in order to labor and to live, I live *from* my labor and *from* my bread" (TI 111; TeI 83). The essential point remains the same: "The need for food does not have existence as its goal, but food" (TI 134; TeI 107). That is to say, the Heideggerian analysis overlooks that which fills our life (whether in sadness or delight). And in an effort to disarm the Heideggerian response that this seems to be a retreat into fallenness, Levinas makes the point that this absorption in the desirable is not a diversion from the bare fact of existence in the Pascalian sense (TI 111; TeI 83). Levinas continues, as if he were answering the opening of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*: "Activity does not derive its meaning and its value from an ultimate and unique goal, as though the world formed one system of use-references whose term touches our very existence. The world answers to a set of autonomous finalities which ignore one another" (TI 133; TeI 106–7). But even if he regards Heidegger's rejection of representation as too hasty, Levinas continues to contest the privilege traditionally accorded to representation. How could representation serve as the founding act? "How would the tension and care of a life arise from impassive representation?" (TI 168; TeI 143). It might seem that Levinas is going round in circles in his effort to do justice to representation without according it that priority which it finds in the tradition.

Representation is understood by intellectualism as constitutive, and yet it is also found to be conditioned, "already implanted" in the being it claims to constitute. That is its "transcendental pretension" (TI 169; TeI 143). Representation performs a kind of reversal by accounting for that which in fact underlies it. But I have only to open my eyes—or one might say, reinhabit naive perceptual faith, for here Levinas is in total agreement with

Merleau-Ponty—and the reversal is undone. “The ‘turning’ of the constituted into a condition is accomplished as soon as I open my eyes: I but open my eyes and already enjoy the spectacle” (TI 130; TeI 103). I have only to eat and my body has already begun to contest representation: “In ‘living from . . .’ the process of constitution which comes into play wherever there is representation is reversed” (TI 128; TeI 101; see also TI 129; TeI 102). But Levinas does not side with the body here against representation; rather he examines the structure to which they both give rise.

The Husserlian privileging of representation and the Heideggerian privileging of care are both questioned on the grounds that “the interval of separation,” the distance between the I and its object, their opposition, is denied (TI 110; TeI 82). Whereas “representation consists in the possibility of accounting for the object as though it were constituted by a thought” (TI 128; TeI 101), in the enjoyment of, for example, eating, the condition supports and nourishes the constituting I. We find here a radical difference which does not allow us to assimilate enjoyment to the model of representation. The reverting of representation into life (TI 127; TeI 100), the turning of ecstatic representation into enjoyment in every instant restores the antecedence of what I constitute to this very constitution (TI 147; TeI 121). “The represented turns into a past that had not traversed the *present* of representation, as an absolute past not receiving its meaning from memory” (TI 130; TeI 103). The represented, the present, as a *fact*, already belongs to the past prior to its representation.

The empirical and the transcendental have their place in Levinas’s *Totality and Infinity* in the discussion of the intentionality of enjoyment and of representation. Transcendental thought is under investigation with representation, just as concretization (corresponding to empiricism) is at issue in the theme of enjoyment. Levinas does not choose between them or attempt to reconcile them. They remain irreducible moments of the logically absurd structure of the *anterior posteriori* (TI 170; TeI 144). The a priori constitution of the object as performed by the idealist subject takes place only after the event, that is to say, a posteriori (TI 153; TeI 126).

When Levinas says that not only knowing but also doing and labor imply the relation of transcendence, he continues the transcendental enterprise behind the I, beneath representation, to the point where the I is called into question by the Other. This is the sense in which the method Levinas adopts “resembles” the transcendental method, but is nevertheless to be differentiated from it. Indeed, representation and enjoyment do not only imply transcendence, they are analogous to transcendence. They are analogous to transcendence in the sense that they also exhibit the anterior posteriori of the relation of the infinite to the cogito. The double origin of the I and the element from which it lives is analogous to the double origin of the I and the radically exterior Other. The blind spot in most discussions of Levinas, whether Levinas’s account of the face-to-face is given a transcendental or an

empirical status, is that they maintain the absolute priority of the face-to-face, something which Levinas's analyses constantly question. What is "analogous to transcendence" in the discussion of "Interiority and Economy" is the double origin. Just as representation and enjoyment are each found to presuppose each other, "the alleged scandal of alterity presupposes the tranquil identity of the same" (TI 203; TeI 178), while at the same time making it possible. In his attempt to secure a transcendental reading of Levinas, de Boer rejects reference to the Cartesian *cogito* (FFL 85) in favor of the model afforded by the Cartesian infinite, so that the other "functions as the transcendental foundation of the same" (FFL 95). But this is to neglect the way in which Levinas had insisted in the first part of *Totality and Infinity* that the *cogito* and the infinite are both absolute starting points for Descartes.¹⁰

There is a paragraph near the end of the second part of *Totality and Infinity* in which Levinas attempts to clarify the way in which he understands the transcendental and the empirical or concrete in their interrelation:

Our work in all its developments strives to free itself from the conception that seeks to unite events of existence affected with opposite signs in an ambivalent condition which alone would have ontological dignity, while the events themselves proceeding in one direction [*sens*] or in another would remain empirical, articulating nothing ontologically new. The method practiced here does indeed consist in seeking the condition of empirical situations, but it leaves to the developments called empirical, in which the conditioning possibility is accomplished—it leaves to the *concretization*—an ontological role that specifies the meaning [*sens*] of the fundamental possibility, a meaning invisible in that condition.

(TI 173; TeI 148)

This difficult passage can be understood to be nothing more than the return of the problem of the ontological versus the ontic, of the formal or the abstract versus the concrete, as we found it in de Boer's account. The first sentence contains a reference to Heidegger's concept of deficient modes, whereby leaving undone is a deficient mode of concern, Being-alone is a deficient mode of Being-with, and passing another by is an indifferent mode of solicitude.¹¹ In each case the reader is told not to understand the latter term—concern, Being-with, and passing another by—with its ordinary connotations but ontologically, although the suspicion prevails that Heidegger is himself aware that the neutralization of this ethically charged language can rarely, if ever, be accomplished. Setting himself against Heidegger's philosophy once more, Levinas in this passage doubts the efficacy of a procedure that remains viable only so long as the existential is kept safe from contamination by the existentiell. But must the second sentence of the paragraph then come to be understood to say that the meaning given to the formal structures by concretization equip them with an irreducible

cultural specificity? The face-to-face, for example, would always be colored by the concrete situation in which it always finds itself. It has to be said that time and time again Levinas has opposed formulations of this kind. Hence the thrust of the passage in question is not to deny the possibility of attaining a realm of meaning prior to or independent of culture and history. The passage is rather Levinas's acknowledgment that although his method is transcendental (at least by resemblance), the sense of the fundamental possibility it reveals is given concretely. It is given not as an injunction imposing a specific ethical act, but as specifying a direction [*sens*], the ethical direction, which neutralization would have eradicated.¹² Levinas's transcendentalism may formally resemble that of Descartes, but in the latter, formal structures hold sway. Descartes's procedure, in common with all transcendental philosophy hitherto, renders invisible the *sens* of the condition it reveals by withdrawing from the empirical or concrete.

That is why in the first part of *Totality and Infinity* Levinas emphasizes that the face of the Other is a concretization which deformatizes the Cartesian structure of the idea of infinity (TI 50; TeI 21). Levinas may on occasion call the face abstract, but he does so only in the sense that it is a disturbance which breaks with cultural meaning and calls into question the horizons of the world. The face is also the most concrete in that the face cannot be approached with empty hands but only from within society. "The transcendence of the face is not enacted outside of the world"—outside of economic life (TI 172; TeI 147). This is how Levinas himself distinguishes the face-to-face from the I-Thou relation of Buber, as de Boer properly acknowledges (FFI 109). The I-Thou relation amounts to a formalism that does not determine any concrete structure (TI 68; TeI 40). "No face can be approached with empty hands and closed home," is Levinas's way of saying that the relation with the absolutely Other who paralyzes possession presupposes economic existence and the Other who welcomes me in the home (TI 172; TeI 147). Thus in a movement parallel to that found in the account of representation and enjoyment, Levinas reverses the movement by which it seemed that the face of the Other was being made an ultimate ground. Hence the intimacy of the home is the "first concretization" (TI 153; TeI 126).

It seems to me that Levinas is using the language of transcendental philosophy and the language of empiricism not in order to draw them together into a transcendental empiricism, but in an effort to find a way between these twin options given to us by the philosophical—and nonphilosophical—language that we have inherited. Only by employing both languages and drawing them into contradiction as he does in the notion of the anterior posteriori can he hope to introduce us to a way of thinking which rests on neither. Early in *Totality and Infinity* Levinas wrote that "the term welcome of the Other expresses a simultaneity of activity and passivity which places the relation with the other outside of the dichotomies valid for things: the

a priori and the a posteriori, activity and passivity" (TI 89; TeI 62). If the disputes among the readers of Levinas have largely been a matter of contesting which limb of the dichotomy should be uppermost—the transcendental or the empirical—then we are still a long way from negotiating his language, which operates by a displacement of their disjunction. Neither a transcendental nor an empirical discourse can be maintained in isolation from the other. Their complicity therefore parallels the complicity which Derrida, found between empiricism and metaphysics and exhibits the proximity between these two thinkers.

Notes

The following abbreviations are used in references in the text and in the notes:

AQ Emmanuel Levinas, *Autrement qu'être; ou, Au-delà de l'essence*; see note 7.

DEE Emmanuel Levinas, *De l'existence à l'existant*; see note 9.

DVI Emmanuel Levinas, *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée*; see note 3.

ED Jacques Derrida, *L'écriture et la différence*; see note 4.

EE Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*; see note 9.

FFL Richard Cohen, ed., *Face to Face with Levinas*; see note 6.

OB Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being; or, Beyond Essence*; see note 7.

TeI Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et Infini*; see note 1.

TI Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*; see note 1.

WD Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*; see note 4.

- 1 E. Levinas, *Totalité et Infini: essai sur l'extériorité* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1961); trans. A. Lingis, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Pr., 1969). Henceforth TeI and TI, respectively.
- 2 Although, like Levinas, I refer to the face-to-face as a relation, it should not be forgotten that he often qualifies this by employing the phrase "relation without relation"; see for example TI 295; TeI 271.
- 3 E. Levinas, *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée*, 2d ed. (Paris: Vrin, 1986), pp. 131–32 and 143. Henceforth DVI.
- 4 J. Derrida, "Violence et métaphysique," *L'écriture et la différence* (Paris: Seuil, 1967), pp. 117–228; trans. A. Bass, *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 79–153. Henceforth ED and WD, respectively.
- 5 The phrase "ontological or transcendental oppression" refers to the last two sections of Derrida's own essay, "Of Transcendental Violence" and "Of Ontological Violence."
- 6 T. de Boer, "An Ethical Transcendental Philosophy," in Richard Cohen, ed., *Face to Face with Levinas* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986). Henceforth FFL.
- 7 E. Levinas, *Autrement qu'être; ou, Au-delà de l'essence* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974), p. 84; trans. A. Lingis, *Otherwise than Being; or, Beyond Essence* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), p. 66. Henceforth AQ and OB, respectively.
- 8 E. Levinas, *Théorie de l'intuition dans la phénoménologie de Husserl* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1930), p. 174; trans. André Orianne, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 119.
- 9 E. Levinas, *De l'existence à l'existant* (Paris: Vrin, 1947), p. 56; trans. A. Lingis, *Existence and Existents* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978), p. 37. Henceforth DEE and EE, respectively.

- 10 See R. Bernasconi, "The Silent World of the Evil Genius" in *The Collegium Phaenomenologicum: The First Ten Years*, ed. Giuseppina Moneta, John Sallis, and Jacques Taminiaux (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1988).
- 11 M. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1949), pp. 57, 120, and 124; trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, *Being and Time* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967), pp. 83, 157, and 161. It should be recognized that there is a certain ambiguity in the last passage as to whether the indifference [*Gleichgültigkeit*] of passing another by is deficient or indifferent [*Indifferenz*]. The question of *Indifferenz* in *Sein und Zeit* needs further examination.
- 12 Levinas refers to cultural meaning as *signification*, which he distinguishes from *sens*. See, for example, "La signification et le sens" in *Humanisme de l'Autre Homme* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1972), pp. 17–63; trans. A. Lingis, *Collected Philosophical Papers* (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), pp. 75–107. These are complex issues which need separate treatment, as Levinas's attempt to keep the ethical separate from the cultural threatens to recreate the problem he found in Heidegger. I will be giving a more thorough discussion of these questions in my forthcoming book *Between Levinas and Derrida*.

THE THIRD PARTY

Levinas on the intersection of the ethical and the political

Robert Bernasconi

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Levinas is recognized as the philosopher of the other human being (*autrui*), but until recently relatively little attention had been paid to his account of the third party.¹ The bulk of this paper is an examination of Levinas's three main accounts of the third party: "The Ego and the Totality" from *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* in 1954;² "The Other and the Others" from *Totality and Infinity* in 1961;³ and "From Saying to the Said, or Wisdom of Desire" from chapter 5 of *Otherwise than being* in 1974.⁴ The third party is the site of the passage to the political in Levinas's thought. Justice begins with "the third man" in the sense of the third party (AE 191; OB 150). However, there are two other "thirds" in Levinas. Alongside the notion of the third party (*le tiers*), there is the notion of the third person (*la troisième personne*), the neutral observer whose standpoint corresponds to that of universal reason, and there is also the difficult notion of "illeity" (*illéité*), which derives from the third person singular personal pronoun "*il*."⁵ The task of the present essay is not to attempt an exhaustive clarification of these three kinds of *tertialité* (AE 191; OB 150), these three interrelated senses of "the third," which are at times barely distinguishable, but to contest the widespread conviction that Levinas must be understood as a philosopher of ethics who nevertheless had little to contribute to our understanding of the political.

The best place to start is with Levinas's apparent uncertainty as to how to relate the third party to the face to face relation. Although Levinas sometimes presented the arrival of the third party as taking place in a subsequent stage of a narrative that began with the face to face, on other occasions Levinas described the third party as being already within the face of the Other. So, at one point in *Otherwise than being*, Levinas described the

third party as appearing on the scene only after the relation to the Other was in place.

If proximity ordered to me only the other alone, there would have not been any problem in even the most general sense of the term. A question would not have been born, nor consciousness, nor self-consciousness. The responsibility for the other is an immediacy antecedent to questions, it is proximity. It is troubled and becomes a problem when the third party enters.

(AE 200; OB 157)

It is as if there could be no third party until the relation to the Other, the second, was already in place. However, two pages later Levinas corrected this proposition when he wrote that "In no way is justice . . . a degeneration that would be produced in the measure that for empirical reasons the initial duo would become a trio" (AE 203; OB 159). This was not a late discovery. Already in *Totality and Infinity* Levinas explicitly denied that the third party relation is an addition to the face to face relation: "It is not that there first would be the face, and then the being it manifests or expresses would concern himself with justice; the epiphany of the face qua face opens humanity" (TeI 188; TI 213). What is at stake between the two different accounts of the entry of the third party is clear. On the one hand, if the introduction of the third party is a subsequent stage in a narrative that begins with the face to face, then structurally whatever political philosophy one finds in Levinas would be derived from his ethics as a modification of it. His relative silence about the political realm further suggests the possibility that he was willing to acquiesce in conventional wisdom about it, perhaps seeing it as the site of the restoration of reason. But insofar as we already find ourselves in society from the outset, so that the passage from the ethical to the political is one we have always already made, the radical impact of Levinas's ethical starting-point would be threatened. It might suggest that even if *de jure* politics was a supplement to ethics, *de facto* my ethical obligations are modified by reference to social and political exigencies. On the other hand, if the political order of justice is not simply a modification and equalization of ethical asymmetry, the possibility arises that Levinas located the third party in the face of the Other in an attempt to challenge both the conventional sense of the political and its derivative status. Levinas would have given an account of the political and the ethical in which they coexist in tension with each other, each with the capacity to question the other. The face to face would serve as a corrective to the socio-political order, even when the latter is based on equality, whereas the presence of the third party in the face of the Other would serve to correct the partiality of a relation to the Other that would otherwise have no reason not to ignore the demands of the other Others. The present essay is dedicated to exploring and refining this second alternative.

To clarify further the impact of Levinas's decision both in *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than being* to locate the third party in the face of the Other, it is necessary to return to the account of the third party offered in 1954 in "The Ego and the Totality." "The Ego and the Totality" has not received much attention from Levinas scholars, perhaps because this sometimes enigmatic text is at certain points hard to reconcile with the account of ethical responsibility developed seven years later in *Totality and Infinity*. However, this is precisely the source of its interest for the present project. In the earlier text the relation to the third party was presented neither as an addition to the face to face, nor as a component of the face to face, but as an alternative to it. Here the third party seems virtually indistinguishable from the third person. Levinas distinguished the violent discourse of the third party, for example, that of the doctor, the psychoanalyst and the judge (MT 370; CP 42), from the discourse without violence of the desensitized face (MT 360 and 369; CP 33 and 42). The role of this distinction emerged in the course of a telling discussion of forgiveness, the purpose of which appears to be to expose the inadequacy of trying to apply a certain popular view of the Christian morality of love and forgiveness to society.⁶ Levinas maintained that in a secular world like the present one, where the understanding of guilt and innocence is no longer governed by belief in a transcendent God, the conditions for forgiveness are met only in the context of the closed society of the couple from which the third party has been excluded. Where there is only one victim, it is always possible for that victim to forgive the offending ego and thereby restore it to its absolute status: "Absolved, the ego would become again absolute" (MT 358; CP 31). However, within what Levinas called "real" or "true" society, I can no longer judge my acts toward you on the basis of my intentions toward you, nor exclude from my consideration the intimate relations you have with others, even though I might be excluded from that intimacy. Levinas considered the case where my recognition of the wrong I did to the other, perhaps also my very repentance of it, injures some third person (MT 358; CP 30). Similar difficulties arise in the case of my readiness to forgive the one who has done me harm, for my friends and companions also feel themselves involved. These considerations led Levinas to accuse the ethics of love and of forgiveness of being neglectful of the third party (MT 360; CP 33). Unlike love, which might be relevant for supernatural salvation, earthly morality is concerned with justice. In this context, "the law has priority over charity" (MT 361; CP 33).

In *Totality and Infinity* Levinas returned to this critique of the couple, directing it against both the erotic relation (TeI 242; TI 264–265) and Buber's account of the I-Thou relation. Levinas alleged that in both cases one remained untroubled by concern for the rest of humanity. Hence Levinas introduced the third party into the face of the Other to exempt the face to face from being a couple. He explained that it is because "the third party

looks at me in the eyes of the Other” that “the self-sufficient ‘I-Thou’” is displaced (TeI 187–8; TI 213). In the “Conclusions” to *Totality and Infinity* Levinas spelled out the implications of this claim for the relation of ethics to politics: “In the measure that the face of the Other relates us with the third party, the metaphysical relation of the I with the Other moves in the form of the We, aspires to a State, institutions, laws, which are the source of universality” (TeI 276; TI 300). If the third party was absent from the face to face, in the face of the Other I would be absolved from all my commitments and obligations to everyone else. Because the third party is already located within the face to face, the passage from ethics to politics is immanent. “The primary sociality” is to be found in “the rigor of justice which judges me and not in love that excuses me” (TeI 281; TI 304). The face of the Other does not ask only for him- or her-self, as if there were only two of us in the world. My responsibility to the Other does not allow me to put aside my responsibility to the others of the Other. However, even if there is thereby already implied a questioning of my relation to the Other – for example, as to whether it is too exclusive or consuming – Levinas’s focus falls on the way that the face to face provides the basis for an ethical questioning of the political. The face to face serves as a corrective to the institutions and the laws of political society: “But politics left to itself bears a tyranny within itself; it deforms the I and other who have given rise to it, for it judges them according to universal rules, and thus as in absentia” (TeI 276; TI 300). By more clearly distinguishing the third party from the third person, it became possible to locate the third party within the face to face relation. My relation to the Other in his or her singularity and my relations to the other Others were conjoined in a single structure.

It is important to recognize that in “The Ego and the Totality” Levinas had already sought to pass from the Other to the others. The context in which he did so was his attempt to give an account of respect as the condition for ethics, albeit not in the form of respect before the law but as a reciprocal respect before another (MT 371; CP 43). Even though the face to face is already in “The Ego and the Totality” concretely understood as saying “you shall not commit murder,” it is not yet asymmetrical, as it would be in *Totality and Infinity*. Instead, “Respect is a relationship between equals” (MT 371; CP 43–44). Levinas explicitly denied that my recognition of another could take the form of submission because, following Hegel’s analysis of the master-slave dialectic, that would take away the value of my recognition (MT 370; CP 43). He argued that if respect before a being who commands a work from me is not to be a form of humiliation, that command must take the form of my being commanded to command the one who commands me. However, respect is not universal, at least not in the first instance, but on phenomenological grounds can be said to be directed to the one who serves others. This is summarized in the formula: “Respect attaches the just man to his associates in justice before it attaches to the man

who demands justice" (MT 371; CP 43). Or, in a sentence that seems to have little or no place in the standard account of Levinas's philosophy: "The one respected is not the one to whom, but the one with whom one renders justice" (MT 371; CP 43). The "we" is established not within the totality, but inasmuch as we break with the totality and history by commanding one another to serve the totality (MT 371–372; CP 44). Although "the invocation is prior to community" (MT 369; CP 41), community arises from doing the work of justice together.

When one returns to *Totality and Infinity* one finds that certain traces of the account found in "The Ego and the Totality" have not been obliterated altogether. This renders Levinas's position in *Totality and Infinity* richer and more complex than most commentators acknowledge. In the section "The Other and the Others," Levinas asserted both the mastery over me of the Other and my equality with him or her (TeI 188; TI 213). My equality with the Other and the Other's mastery over me both refer to my being commanded by the Other to serve with him or her. The Other serves the third party and commands me to join with him or her in this service. However, we would not be equal if the Other did not also recognize my own self-mastery. Hence Levinas stipulated that "this command can concern me only inasmuch as I am master myself" (TeI 188; TI 213). My mastery over myself is recognized even as my freedom is questioned. As in "The Ego and the Totality," the Other issues a command that commands me to command the one who is commanding me: "The presence of the face, the infinity of the other, is a destituteness, a presence of the third party (that is, of the whole of humanity which looks at us) and a command that commands commanding" (TeI 188; TI 213). It is important to attend carefully to the personal pronoun in Levinas's account of the third within the face of the Other. The whole of humanity looks not at *me* but at *us*. Separation is the precondition of the face to face, but through the third party I am joined with the Other.

The main thrust of Levinas's account is to resist the reduction of ethics to politics (cf. TeI 192; TI 216). But it is apparent that it is precisely within the context of political society – and not in an ethical realm abstracted from it – that Levinasian ethics has its impact. In the course of the discussion following the delivery of his lecture "Transcendence and Height," Levinas spoke of the tears that the bureaucratic functionary cannot see.⁷ He thereby acknowledged that, however justly and smoothly the political realm might be functioning, this remains insufficient from the ethical perspective: there is always more to be said and done. The invisibility of the face of the Other to the third person perspective leads to "the tyranny of the universal and of the impersonal," the tyranny of politics and of the judgment of history as seen from the standpoint of the victor (TeI 219–221; TI 242–244). But tyranny can be exposed as such by the face. The ethical reorients the political. If Levinas, perhaps somewhat clumsily, attempted at times to express the

relation of the ethical to the political by according a chronological priority of the face of the Other over the third party, his more careful formulations avoided casting it within a narrative idiom. By presenting the relation of the ethical and the political as a difference between layers of meaning, the focus passes from the priority of the ethical over the political to the point of intersection between them.

Levinas had no interest in attempting to resolve the conflict between ethics and politics which lay at the basis of the disruption of good conscience. Nor did he propose a means by which this conflict could be resolved in individual cases. In *Otherwise than being*, not only is the ethical presented as an interruption of the political, but the third party is itself also understood from another perspective to "interrupt" the face to face (AE 191; OB 150). Levinas introduced the discussion of the third party in *Otherwise than being* with a series of questions. He asked first why proximity would fall into being. He then continued: "Why have we gone to seek *essence* on its empyrean? Why know? Why is there a problem? (*Pourquoi problème?*) Why philosophy?" (AE 199; OB 157). His initial answer, which echoes "The Ego and the Totality," was that there would be no problems if proximity directed me to the Other alone. Responsibility for the Other becomes a problem only when the third party enters (AE 200; OB 157). However, as I have already recalled, Levinas quickly exposed as a fiction the idea that the third party arrives only when the face to face is already in place: "the others concern me from the first" (AE 202; OB 159). But Levinas still found it necessary to construe the relation with the Other and the relation to the others as separate: "The relationship with the third party is an incessant correction of the asymmetry of proximity in which the face is de-faced" (AE 201; OB 158. Trans. modified). "The incessant correction of the asymmetry of proximity" means in effect that my relation with the Other is called into question and in terms that might legitimately be described as political.

The way leads from responsibility to problems. A problem is posited by proximity itself, which, as the immediate itself, is without problems. The extra-ordinary commitment of the Other to the third party calls for control, a search for justice, society and the State, comparison and possession, thought and science, commerce and philosophy, and outside of anarchy, the search for a principle.

(AE 205; OB 161)

There is much that is remarkable in this passage, but I will emphasize only two features that reveal a strong continuity with Levinas's earlier efforts to address these issues. First, it is the Other's commitment to the third party, and not the arrival of the third party on the scene, that is said to call for justice. Levinas had not lost sight of the idea of the Other as the one with whom one renders justice. Second, whereas one can never resolve the conflict

between the ethical and the political, the task of negotiating in practice the conflicting demands under which I find myself, involves the use of reason, that is, the third person perspective.

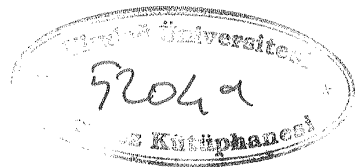
This last point is confirmed by the relatively late (1984) essay "Peace and Proximity" where the first question in the inter-human is said to be the question of justice. This calls for comparison and "a reason that thematizes, synchronizes and synthesizes," albeit what is at stake is "the comparison of incomparables."⁸ Nevertheless, Levinas insisted that political unity and political institutions that were founded on the basis of being and of rational truth ultimately had "peace and justice as their origin, justification and measure" (PP 346; BPW 169). This meant that "a State delivered to its own necessities" is impossible to justify, thereby confirming the need for ethics to correct politics. However, to explain how Levinas negotiated the conflicting demands of ethics and politics, the terms of the analysis have to be expanded to include reference to illeity and fraternity.

Levinas introduced the neologism "illeity" in "The Trace of the Other" in 1963 and in "Meaning and Sense" in 1964.⁹ By the end of both these essays, illeity had been identified with "the revealed God of our Judeo-Christian spirituality" (HH 63; CP 107). Illeity is the place of God in Levinas's philosophy, but it is not a theological notion (AE 188; OB 147). It is the condition of the irreversibility of the face to face (HH 59; CP 104). It would be possible to read that the relation to illeity is "personal and ethical" (HH 60; CP 104) and to overlook the fact that it also addressed the political.¹⁰ However, Levinas wrote of the Judeo-Christian God in "Meaning and Sense":

He shows himself only by his trace as is said in Exodus 33. To go toward Him is not to follow this trace which is not a sign; it is to go toward the others who stand in the trace of illeity.

(HH 63; CP 107)

This formulation emphasizes the way in which illeity addresses the same issue to which the third party is directed, even if in *Otherwise than being* illeity is expressly distinguished from the third party as the one who interrupts the face to face and initiates justice (AE 191; OB 150). However, the correction of the asymmetry of proximity is not the correction of illeity in the form of a departure from it but rather another form of the relation to illeity: "There is a betrayal of my anarchic relation with illeity, but also a new relation with it" (AE 201; OB 158). Illeity is therefore not only "the fact that the others show themselves in their face" (AE 15; OB 13). Illeity also has certain "indirect ways" that through "the presence of a third party alongside of the neighbor" lead me along the path of thematization and consciousness to that comparison of the incomparable that is necessary for justice and that is usually assigned to the third person perspective (AE 20; OB 16). Illeity is the condition for irreversibility, the irreversibility of time



and of the relation with the Other (HH 59; CP 104), but it is also through illeity – Levinas says, “thanks to God” – that I am another for the others and have rights as well (AE 201; OB 158).

Part of the function of the neologism “illeity” is to hold together in a single term the conflict between the ethical and the political that arose from the location of the third party in the face of the Other. The conflict amounted to a contradiction, or, more precisely, what Levinas could not think without the idea of contradiction suggesting itself to him. In *Otherwise than being* Levinas associated the introduction of the third party with the introduction of a contradiction:

The third party introduces a *contradiction* in the saying whose signification before the other until then went in one direction. It is of itself the limit of responsibility and the birth of this question: What do I have to do with justice?

(AE 200; OB 157. My italics)

Sometimes Levinas was a little hesitant about the term contradiction. In an interview he gave in 1982, “Philosophy, Justice, Love,” after confirming that his central idea was that of the asymmetry of the interpersonal, Levinas explained, “But to this idea – and without contradicting it – I add immediately concern for the third party and, from then on, justice” (EN 123). But in the same year, in the course of a discussion that took place in the aftermath of the massacre of Palestinians in the camps at Sabra and Chantila, Levinas acknowledged that there was a “direct contradiction between ethics and politics, if both these demands are taken to the extreme.”¹¹ Levinas’s concern was not with maintaining the purity of an ethics ignorant of politics, but rather with the conflict between ethics and politics, where ethics questions political society and yet at the same time is remorselessly drawn out of itself to negotiate the political. Whereas the use of narrative exposition in *Totality and Infinity* led to the tendency to present the relation of ethics and politics in terms of a derivation of one from the other, it seems that in his later thought Levinas sought a way of focusing on them as conflicting aspects of what he increasingly presented as a single structure.

In his 1982 essay “Useless Suffering” Levinas reaffirmed that the political is neither derived from the ethical, nor entirely independent of it.

The order of politics – post-ethical or pre-ethical – which inaugurates the “social contract” is neither the sufficient condition nor the necessary outcome of ethics. In its ethical position, the self (*le moi*) is distinct from the citizen born of the City, and from the individual who precedes all order in his natural egoism, from whom political philosophy, since Hobbes, tries to derive – or succeeds in deriving – the social or political order of the City.¹²

In this essay Levinas named the order in which the intersection between the ethical and the political took place the "interhuman" (EN 118–119; US 164–165). It corresponds to what Levinas more commonly called "fraternity." Levinas was perhaps drawn to this alternative term, "interhuman," in an attempt to avoid the criticism directed at his use of sexist language, although the larger complaint extended beyond his language to his analysis of the feminine itself.

Levinas employed the concept of fraternity in *Totality and Infinity* in order to establish a framework for an understanding of human society that did not depend on the idea of the human race as a biological genus (TeI 188–189; TI 213). Levinas did not deny the validity of the concept of the human race, but he claimed that a conception of society based on responsibility needed to stress both common paternity and the separateness of individuals and that this was better secured by appealing to the kind of paternity offered by monotheism than it was by a notion of biological paternity. A human community based on a common genus would, Levinas insisted, neither separate the individuals from each other sufficiently, nor bind them together closely enough. By contrast, a notion of fraternity rooted in monotheism gives rise to "individualities whose logical status is not reducible to the status of ultimate differences in a genus, for their singularity consists in each referring to itself" (TeI 189; TI 214). Levinas did not say that only the monotheistic notion of common paternity could secure the concept of fraternity here suggested. He would presumably have been satisfied with any notion of fraternity that exhibited the appropriate features and that in particular left room for the independence of the separated person. Levinas's analysis here was clearly directed by his attempt to develop an alternative to the racist philosophy of National Socialism where the exaltation of biological life subordinated the individual to the impersonal triumph of the *Volk* or of the species (TeI 92–93; TI 120).¹³ As Levinas explained, "The biological human brotherhood – conceived with the sober coldness of Cain – is not a sufficient reason for me to be responsible for a separated being."¹⁴ Fraternity is, therefore, Levinas's name for the way in which the relation with the Other is already recognized as giving way to the relation with other Others.

The relation with the face in fraternity, where in his [or her] turn the Other appears in solidarity with all the others, constitutes the social order, the reference of every dialogue to the third party by which the *We* – or the party – encompasses the face to face opposition . . .

(TeI 257; TI 280)

The reference of the social order to fraternity challenges the conception of politics that reduces it to a network of relations organized with reference to the species, the people, or the race. Just as the notion of justice provided

Levinas with the means to pass from the ethical to the political while maintaining their separation, so the notion of fraternity joins the Other and the third party without reducing them to units within a totality.

Alongside Levinas's rejection of the attempt to base the idea of human community on biological genus, one can find an attack on the idea that human society is based on resemblance (TeI 188–189; TI 213–214). The implications were clearly spelled out in "Language and Proximity," an essay which can perhaps be said to offer the "more radical phenomenological analysis" of "the face to face of language" that "The Ego and the Totality" promised but did not provide (MT 371; CP 43). Levinas used the notion of language to render more concrete the idea that the fraternity of human society was not based on biology:

Language in terms of genus and species, the notion of the human race, will recover its rights after the event. It is in fraternity, or language, that this race is founded.

(EDE 232–233; CP 123)

The fraternity of language is not confined to those who share the same particular language. Where there is language, communication is possible across languages: "Language is the possibility of entering into relationship independently of every system of signs common to the interlocutors" (EDE 232; CP 122). That is why Levinas can find in language a means of overcoming barriers: "Like a battering ram, it is the power to break through the limits of culture, body, and race" (EDE 232; CP 122). The battering ram of language that combats the division into races is established on the basis of an appeal, not to the complicity of clandestinity as in *Totality and Infinity* (TeI 187; TI 212), but to the complicity of fraternity (EDE 236; CP 125). In other words, if the "abstractness" of the face means that the Other is not encountered in terms of race (HH 57; CP 102), fraternity forms the bonds that transcend race. Parallel analyses can be found in *Otherwise than being* where fraternity appears as a synonym for "proximity" (AE 118; OB 92) and "responsibility for the Other" (AE 148–149; OB 116). Levinas constantly reiterates its force as an escape from all biologism. Fraternity is "a relation of kinship outside of all biology, 'against all logic,'" (AE 109; OB 87); it "precedes the commonness of a genus" (AE 202; OB 159): "Between the one I am and the other for whom I am responsible there gapes open a difference, without a basis in community. The unity of the human race is in fact posterior to fraternity" (AE 211; OB 166).

I have chosen to focus on the notion of fraternity rather than the notion of justice, as is more usual, because justice is a shifting term in Levinas. It is no surprise that when in 1975 Levinas was invited to reconcile his various statements about justice, he sidestepped the issue (DVI 132–133). However, the question was phrased in terms of whether justice names the relationship

with the Other or the third party, which is the wrong way to pose it. Levinas's explanation in 1975 was that "justice" applied much more to the relation with the third party than to that with the Other, but he recalled immediately that the third already looks at me in the apparition of the Other (DVI 132–133). Levinas completed his response by emphasizing that the ontological language of *Totality and Infinity* was not definitive. One can understand that to mean that Levinas was cautioning against the narrative or foundational language that made it seem that politics could be derived from ethics. Levinas had already explained in 1957 that his early preference for the term "justice" was a preference characteristic of Judaism and it arose from the close association of the Other and the third party: "For love itself demands justice, and my relation with my neighbour cannot remain outside the lines which this neighbour maintains with various third parties."¹⁵ Furthermore, in one of his confessional writings Levinas explained that "In the justice of the Rabbis, difference retains its meaning."¹⁶ This is the same structure that Levinas called by the names "fraternity" and "the interhuman." But the fact that in the late works justice usually did not have the same meaning that it had had in the early ones is confirmed by the observation that in the late works ethics interrupts justice, whereas in "The Ego and the Totality" it was justice that interrupted the march of history (MT 373; CP 45). In the light of what has been said above one can speculate that this narrowing of the term justice was brought about by Levinas's desire to emphasize the intersection of the ethical and politics and not by any tendency to want to diminish the political.

That Levinas lacked a proper recognition of institutions, of politics, of culture and of customs, is a frequently heard objection. If this means that there is no philosophy of institutions and of culture in Levinas, the objection is true but somehow beside the point, because Levinas did not attempt to write an ontology of the social world. It could hardly be said that he ignored institutions altogether when the Preface to *Totality and Infinity* made clear that the book was a response to war and to the tyrannical tendency of institutions, both direct and surreptitious (TeI ix; TI 21). Although the direction of Levinas's thought appears always to be in favor of ethics over politics, desire over need, the saying over the said, it is never to the exclusion of the second term, because the terms are not set in opposition to the other. There is no ethics without politics, no desire without need and no saying without a said. To ignore institutions and politics would be like remaining on the spiritual level of desire, thereby approaching the Other with empty hands. It would be to seek the condition of empirical situations, while ignoring the concretization which specifies their meaning (TeI 148; TI 173). The ethical interrupts the political, not to direct it in the sense of determining what must be done, but to challenge its sense that it embodies the ultimate wisdom of "the bottom line." Levinas's thought cannot be assimilated to what conventionally passes as political philosophy, but it was never intended to do so and that is its strength.¹⁷

References

- 1 There are some noteworthy exceptions. See especially Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), pp. 225–237; and Adriaan Peperzak, *To the Other*, (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1993), pp. 167–184.
- 2 E. Levinas, “Le moi et la totalité”, *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, 59, 1954, pp. 353–373; trans. A. Lingis, “The Ego and the Totality”, *Collected Philosophical Papers*. (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), pp. 25–45. Henceforth MP and CP respectively. Reprinted in *Entre nous*, Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1991, pp. 25–52. Henceforth EN.
- 3 E. Levinas, *Totalité et Infini*, (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1961), pp. 187–190; trans. A. Lingis, *Totality and Infinity*, (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), pp. 212–214. Henceforth TeI and TI respectively.
- 4 E. Levinas, *Autrement qu’être ou au-delà de l’essence*, (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974), pp. 195–207; trans. A. Lingis, *Otherwise than being or beyond essence*, (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), pp. 153–162. Henceforth AE and OB respectively.
- 5 E. Levinas, “Enigme et phénomène”, *En découvrant l’existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*, (Paris: Vrin, 1974), p. 214; trans. A. Lingis, “Phenomenon and Enigma”, CP 71. *En découvrant l’existence* henceforth abbreviated as EDE. The third person singular in the grammatical sense should not be confused with the third person perspective of reason.
- 6 Subsequently Levinas not only developed a more conciliatory approach to Christianity and its themes of love and forgiveness, but he also gave love a more prominent role in his thinking. In a 1982 interview Levinas declared that “Justice proceeds from love” and that “love ought always to watch over justice”. E. Levinas, “Philosophie, justice et amour”, *Espirit*, 1983, nos. 8–9, p. 11. Reprinted at EN 126.
- 7 E. Levinas, “Transcendence et Hauteur”, *Bulletin de la Société française de Philosophie*, 1962, vol. 3, p. 102; trans. T. Charter, N. Walker, and S. Critchley, “Transcendence and Height”, *Levinas. Basic Philosophical Writings*, (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1996), p. 23. Henceforth TH and BPW respectively.
- 8 E. Levinas, “Paix et proximité”, *Emmanuel Levinas. Les Cahiers de La nuit surveillée*, ed. Jacques Rolland, (Lagrasse: Verdier, 1984), p. 345; trans. Peter Atterton and Simon Critchley, “Peace and Proximity”, BPW p. 168. “Peace and Proximity” henceforth abbreviated as PP.
- 9 E. Levinas, “La signification et le sens”, *Humanisme de l’autre homme*, (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1972), p. 63; trans. BPW 63–64. Henceforth HH. As the distinction of the trace and of illeity in “La Trace de l’autre”, except for a few omissions, is almost identical (EDE 197–202), to that found in “La signification et le sens”, I have used the latter. On illeity see Bernhard Casper, “Illéité. Zu einem Schlüssel ‘Begriff’ im Werk von Emmanuel Levinas”, *Philosophisches Jahrbuch*, 91, 1984, pp. 273–288.
- 10 I am not the first to recognize the political purchase of illeity. See Rebecca Comay, “Facies Hippocratica”, *Ethics as First Philosophy*, ed. Adriaan Peperzak (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 232: “But this nontheological theology is precisely *politics*.”

- 11 E. Levinas and Alain Finkielkraut, "Israël: éthique et politique", *Les Nouveaux Cahiers* 18, 1982–3; 71, p. 4; trans. Sean Hand, "Ethics and Politics", *The Levinas Reader* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p. 292. Henceforth IE and LR respectively. I have taken a preliminary look at this controversial interview in "Who is my neighbor? Who is the other? Questioning 'the Generosity of Western Thought'", *Ethics and Responsibility in the Phenomenological Tradition*, (Pittsburgh: The Simon Silverman Phenomenology Center, 1992), pp. 1–31.
- 12 E. Levinas, "La souffrance inutile", EN 119; trans. R. Cohen, "Useless Suffering", *The Provocation of Levinas*, p. 165. Henceforth US.
- 13 Levinas offered as an example Kurt Schilling's *Einführung in die Staats-und Rechtsphilosophie*, (Berlin: Junker und Dunnhaupt, 1939). Schilling founds the state on the natural connection of race and the mythical-historical connection of a people. See Tef 93n; TI 120n.
- 14 E. Levinas, "Dieu et la philosophie", *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée*, (Paris: Vrin, 1986), p. 117; trans. A. Lingis and R. Cohen, "God and Philosophy", BPW 142. Henceforth DVI. See also AE 12; OB 10 and TH 107–108; BPW 27–28.
- 15 E. Levinas, *Difficile liberté*, (Paris: Vrin, 1976), p. 34; trans. Sean Hand, *Difficult Freedom*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), p. 18.
- 16 E. Levinas, *L'au-delà du verset*, (Paris: Minuit, 1982), p. 133; trans. Gray D. Mole, *Beyond the Verse*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 107.
- 17 A slightly longer version of this paper is available in Antje Kapust's German translation as "Wer ist der Dritte? Überkreuzung von Ethik und Politik bei Levinas", *Der Anspruch des Anderen*, eds. B. Waldenfels and I. Därmann, Munich, Wilhelm Fink, 1998, pp. 87–110. Some remarks about Levinas's treatment of race and racism have had to be removed from the present version to meet the word limit. I would like to thank Claus-Arthur Scheier, Pascal Delhoum, and Claire Katz for their comments on earlier versions of this paper.

OUR CLANDESTINE COMPANION

Maurice Blanchot

Source: R. A. Cohen (ed.) *Face to Face with Levinas*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986, pp. 41–50. Originally published in French as “Notre compagne clandestine”, in F. Laruelle (ed.) *Textes pour Emmanuel Levinas*, Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1980, pp. 79–87.

Twenty years ago Levinas wrote, “For everyone, this century will have witnessed the end of philosophy” – yet, by ending this very same phrase with an exclamation point, he modified and possibly reversed its sense. This punctual addition was particularly welcome since, having been destined to bring philosophy back down to earth, our epoch will perhaps be remembered as one of the richest in philosophers (if the word *rich* still passes as pertinent), marked throughout by philosophical investigation and by an unparalleled rivalry among the sciences, literature, and philosophy, all of which necessarily gives philosophy the last word – and averts its demise.

All, shamefully, gloriously

Whether shamefully, gloriously, mistakenly, or by default, we are all philosophers; especially when we submit whatever seems philosophical (a term chosen to avoid emphasizing “philosophy” as such) to a questioning so radical that the entire tradition would have to be called forth in its support. But I would add (while repeating the warning of Bacon and Kant: *de nobis ipsis silemus*¹) that, as soon as I encountered – a happy encounter, in the strongest sense – Emmanuel Levinas, more than fifty years ago, it was with a sort of testimony that I persuaded myself that philosophy was life itself, youth itself, in its unbridled – yet nonetheless reasonable – passion, renewing itself continually and suddenly by an explosion of new and enigmatic thoughts or by still unknown names, who would later shine forth as prodigious figures.

Philosophy would henceforth be our companion day and night, even by losing its name, by becoming literature, scholarship, the lack thereof, or by standing aside. It would be the clandestine friend we always respected,

loved, which meant we were not bound by it – all the while giving us to believe that there was nothing awakened in us, vigilant unto sleep, not due to our difficult friendship. Philosophy or love. But philosophy is precisely not an allegory.

An invincible skepticism

Levinas wrote (and some of these quotes are from memory) that skepticism was invincible. While easily refuted, the refutation leaves skepticism intact. Is it really contradicted when it openly uses reasons that it destroys? Contradiction is also the essence of skepticism: just as it combats every dogmatism openly, by exposing its unsatisfactory or onerous presuppositions (origin, truth, value, authenticity, the exemplary or proper, etc.), so does it do so in an implicit way, referring itself back to a “dogmatism” so absolute that every assertion is threatened (this is already to be observed in the ancient skeptics and in Sextus Empiricus.) This doesn’t mean that one should take pleasure in that maniacal and pathetic sort of nihilism Lyotard rightly denounces and for which, once and for all, nothing is of *value*. Once again, this would be a kind of rest or security. What is at fault with nihilism – a term without vigor or rigor – is not knowing its own weaknesses and always stopping prematurely. The invincible skepticism that Levinas admits shows that his own philosophy, his metaphysics (these names so easily disparaged), affirms nothing that is not overseen by an indefatigable adversary, one to whom he does not concede but who obliges him to go further, not beyond reason into the facility of the irrational or towards a mystical effusion, but rather towards another reason, towards the other as reason or demand. All this appears in each of his books. Doubtless, he follows the same path; but in each case, the unexpected emerges to render the path so new or so ancient that, following it along, we are struck as by a blow to the heart – the heart of a reason – that makes us say within ourselves, “But I’ve also thought that; I *must* think it.”

Valéry: “The other man, a fundamental concept”

Some thinkers are perhaps more naive than others: Descartes more naive than Leibniz; Plato more naive than Plato. Heidegger, this thinker of our own time, is so bereft of naiveté that he has to have disciples to put it into perspective, disciples, moreover, who can’t be called upon to excuse him from what happened in 1933 (but this last point is so serious that one cannot be content with an episodic allusion: Nazism and Heidegger, this is a wound in thought itself, and each of us is profoundly wounded – it will not be dealt with by preterition). Philosophical naiveté is perhaps inseparable from philosophical evidence, since the latter brings forth the most recent (what is newest in the oldest) and because what it says or *advances* there

necessarily lends itself to critique: what is advanced is vulnerable, yet nonetheless it is the most important. When Levinas asked if ontology were fundamental (excluding other issues here, and for other reasons, which precede those of Heidegger – who also came to object to these two terms, in the same way that he puts the word *being* under erasure), in a certain way he posed a naive question, one that was unexpected and unheard of, because it broke with what seemed to have renewed philosophy and also because he was the first to have contributed to understanding and transmitting this thought. Raising the question, then, Levinas broke with himself. By this move, when Levinas pronounced the word *other* and the relation of the I to the Other as exorbitant, as an infinite or transcendent relation, one that could not be grasped by a reflection on being and beings, given that the whole of Western philosophy had been traditionally oriented by the privilege accorded to the Same, to the Self-Same, or more abruptly, to identity, it became obvious that subsequent criticism would judge his affirmation naive and would accumulate objections to refute it (as is said of K. in *The Castle*: he always refuted everything). All the same, it is the critique that was naive – not to understand what was decisive or difficult in this exigency, an exigency that made reason (even practical reason) ill at ease, without repudiating it in the meantime, however.

I recall the following from Valéry's *Notebooks* (Valéry, this hardly naive writer, who nevertheless is, sometimes happily, sometimes unhappily, especially when he sets out to malign philosophy, which he doesn't know very well anyway): "The systems of the philosophers, which I hardly know, seem generally trifling.", which is clearly a presentiment of the Other's importance, even if he expresses it somewhat inadequately: "Other, a similar other, or perhaps a double of myself [but, precisely, the other cannot be an alter ego], this is the most mesmerizing abyss, the most recurrent question, the most cunning obstacle. . . . Thus," Valéry remarkably adds, "the other man . . . remains a fundamental conception."

Questioning language

I am sure that Levinas does not mind philosophizing in ways that might seem somewhat unfashionable. Philosophy is, if anything, untimely, and to characterize his work as novel is what would least agree with him. Nonetheless, while restoring metaphysics and ethics to an eminence they formerly, if not unwittingly, enjoyed, Levinas anticipates, or follows out in his own way, the preoccupations that are preeminently (or, unfortunately) those of our time. For example, he never fails to question the domain of language in a crucial, astute way, one that has for so long been neglected by the philosophical tradition. Valéry, for example, thought he could put philosophy in a difficult situation by claiming that "philosophy and all the rest is only a peculiar use of words" and that "every metaphysics results from a

poor use of words.” The remark gets clarified when he explains his own conception of language, what might be called an existential view, namely, that what counts is that the “lived [*réelle*], internal experience” conceals a conceptually ordered system, a system of notations and conventions that goes far beyond “the quite particular and personal phenomenon.” Beyond the singular phenomenon itself, then, such a view conveys the general value of truth or law. In other words, Valéry reproaches philosophy for being what he will demand that literature and poetry be: the possibility of language, the invention of a second-degree language (“to think in a form that one would have invented”), without the “foolish and indomitable pretension” of making it seem one could get out of the situation by having this language pass for thought. It is true that Valéry will add (a warning that still holds for the best linguists when they concern themselves with poetics) that “every investigation about Art and Poetry tends to make necessary what is essentially arbitrary.” Thus, he points out the temptations or “mimological perversions” that arise when necessity is equated with the appearance, or the effect, of necessity – a somewhat enigmatic attempt of discursive mutation, all the same.

Irreducible diachrony

What matters to Levinas is something else, and it is only involved indirectly – happily, should I say? – in linguistic research. If there is an extreme dissymmetry between “me and the Other” (expressed in his impressive remark that “the Other is always closer to God than I,” who preserves His power, whatever is understood by the unnameable name of God), if the infinite relation between me and other might nonetheless be a relation of language, if it is allowed me, I who am scarcely myself, to have a relation with the extreme other – the closest and farthest – through speech, then there could not fail to result certain exigencies that might reverse or overturn speech itself, even if this were only the following: the Other or other can not be thematized. All of which is to say, I will not speak of the other or about the other, but I will speak – if I speak – *to* the Other (i.e., to the stranger, the poor, him who has no speech, even the master, bereft of mastery), not to inform him or to transmit knowledge to him – a task for ordinary language – but rather to invoke him (this other so other that his mode of address is not “you” but “he”), to render him witness by a manner of speaking that doesn’t efface the infinite distance, but is speech by this distance, a speech born of the infinite.

In each of his books Levinas continually refines, by an ever more rigorous reflection, what was said on this subject in his *Totality and Infinity*: what, properly, had been *said*, that is, thematized, and thus was always already said, instead of remaining to be said. From this one of the persistent and insoluble problems of philosophy derives: how can philosophy be talked

about, opened up, and presented, without, by that very token, using a particular language, contradicting itself, mortgaging its own possibility? Must not the philosopher be a writer, and thus forego philosophy, even while pointing out the philosophy implicit in writing? Or, just as well, to pretend to teach it, to master it – that is, this venture of a non-mastered, oral speech, all the while demeaning himself from time to time by *writing* books? How can one maintain the dissymmetry, the intersubjectively qualified (and wrongly so) curvature of space, the infinity of a speech born of the infinite? Levinas will go furthest, in the text entitled “The Saying and the Said,” a text that speaks to us, just as if the extraordinary itself spoke to us, about something I have no intention or ability to take up or sum up. One simply has to read it, and meditate upon it. Indeed, I can somewhat evasively recall that if the said is always already said, then the Saying is never only to be said, something that does not privilege the future (the future present of the future), nor is it even – at least, this is how I interpret it – a prescription as edict. Rather, it is what no ego can take upon itself and safeguard in its keep: it can only be done by giving it up. Saying is giving, loss (yes, loss), but, and I might add, loss within the impossibility of loss pure and simple. By the said, we belong to order, to the world (the cosmos), and we are present to the other with whom we deal as equals. We are contemporaries.

Somewhere in Saying, however, we are uprooted from that order, without which order itself might serenely disappear into disorder. Such is the non-coincidence with the Other: the impossibility of being together in a simple simultaneity, the necessity (the obligation) of assuming a time not of the present, what Levinas will term the “*irreducible diachrony*,” which is not a lived temporality, but rather is marked as a lapse (or absence) of time. This is what Saying entails in our responsibility towards the other, a responsibility so beyond measure that we are given over to it passively, at the limit of all patience – rather than being capable of responding to it autonomously, out of our pretension to be subjects. On the contrary, we are subjected, we are exposed (an exposure that is not of presence or of unconcealment) and revealed as *ourselves* at risk, thoroughly obsessed or besieged to the point of “substitution” – the one who practically doesn’t exist existing only for the other – in the “*one for the other*” relation. Such a relation mustn’t be thought of as an identification, since it doesn’t occur by way of being; nor is this relation simply one of nonbeing, for it nonetheless gauges the incommensurable. The relation is one of positive impropriety, of strangeness and interruption; and yet, it is a *substitution* of one for the other, a difference as nonindifference.

Indiscretion towards the unsayable

I recall several of Levinas’ phrases, the resonance of which is that of philosophy itself – an appeal of reason for the awakening of another reason, the

recollection of speaking within the said – this ancillary language that nonetheless claims not to subdue the *exception*: “Indiscretion towards the unsayable. Maybe this will be the task of philosophy.” Or again, “Perhaps philosophy is only the exaltation of language, within which words (subsequently) condition the very stability of religion, science, and, technology.” From this point we can foresee the requirements raised for language, namely, to enunciate the Saying. But this is an activity only in appearance if it prolongs (in a nonself-possessing hold) the uttermost passivity. The enigma of a Saying is like that of a God speaking within man – within this man who counts on no God, for whom there is no home, who is exiled from all worlds, who has no hidden world, and who in the end doesn’t even have language as an abode (at least to any greater extent than by having it merely to speak in the affirmative or negative). This is why Levinas – getting back to the thought of an invincible skepticism – will also say (if I’m not mistaken) that “language is already skepticism.” And here the accent should perhaps be placed on the *already*, not only because language would be inadequate or essentially negative, or even because it would surpass the limits of thought, but also, and perhaps just as well, precisely because of this relation with the ex-cessive, insofar as this relation bears the trace of what has happened in a nonpresence, a trace that has left no traces of what is always already effaced, but bearing it, nonetheless, beyond being. Thus, language itself would be skepticism; thought of in this sense, indeed, it would not allow satisfaction with absolute knowledge or allow transparent communication. Because of this, it would be a language to overtax the whole of language, precisely by not exceeding it: it would be the language of the epoché, or, according to Jean-Luc Nancy, it would be one of lapse or syncopation. To a certain extent then (and how much is unclear), the skepticism of language undermines every guarantee, by reason of which it does not enclose us in what it would pretend ought to be the case, namely, a sure set of conditions.

The divine comedy

I hardly think that a good approach to Levinas’ thought would characterize it in terms of certain topics that are indeed admissible, but that might justify a cursory reading or might arrest those extreme questions continually being posed to us – would characterize it, for example, as a philosophy of transcendence or as a metaphysical ethics. Such an approach would probably be inadequate, if only because we no longer know how to grasp such words, overcharged as they are with traditional meaning. The word transcendence is either too strong – it quickly reduces us to silence – or, on the other hand, it keeps both itself and us within the limits of what it should open up. In his own unique way, Jean Wahl used to say that the greatest transcendence, the transcendence of transcendence, is ultimately

the immanence, or the perpetual referral, of the one to the other. Transcendence within immanence: Levinas is the first to devote himself to this strange structure (sensibility, subjectivity) and not to let himself be satisfied by the shock value of such contrarities. Yet, one is always struck by one of his typical procedures: to begin, or to follow out, an analysis (most often, phenomenologically inspired) with such rigor and informed understanding that it seems precisely in this way that everything is said and that truth itself is disclosed – right along, that is, until we get to a minor remark, usually introduced by, e.g., an “*unless*” to which we cannot fail to be attentive, which fissures the whole of the preceding text, disturbing the solid order we had been called upon to observe, an order that nonetheless remains important. This is perhaps *the* movement that could properly be called philosophical, not by stroke of force or belabored assertion, but a movement that was already Plato’s expedient in his dialogues (his probity, and ruse as well). It is not so much a question of hermeneutics, since in a certain sense Levinas stands out and breaks with a tradition he understands completely, but rather it is that this tradition serves him as a springboard and a frame of reference.

In comparison, and when confronting the unsayable, *philosophical invention* renders our indiscretion concrete – as it does in a quite different way with the call to one who is beyond being, to an “*excess*” that is neither irrational nor romantic. Thus, by a kind of respectful parricide, he enjoins us not to rely on the *presence* and identity of Husserlian *consciousness*, but to substitute for phenomenological (or ontological) rationality a kind of reason understood as vigil, as a ceaseless awakening, as a *vigilance*. This is not meant to be a state of the soul – an ecstasy of drunkenness, a discontent with lucidity – nor to cause excitement about the “Ego” and its decentered interior; rather, it concerns the other in me who is yet outside of me, that which can no longer be grasped in an experience (it is neither an event nor an advent), since every manifestation (indeed, even the nonmanifest content of the unconscious) always winds up giving itself over to the *presence* that keeps us within being. Thus are we exposed, by way of our own responsibility, to the enigma of the nonphenomenal, the nonrepresentable, within the ambiguity between the trace to be deciphered and the indecipherable.

Likewise (in the same way?), if Levinas pronounces or writes the name of God, he does not pass over into religion or theology, nor does he thereby conceptualize it. In fact, he gives us a presentiment that, without being another name for the Other (always other than the Other, “otherwise other”), the infinite transcendence, the transcendence of the infinite, to which we try to subject God, will always be ready to veer off “to the point of possible confusion with the bustle of the *there is*.” But what is there about what Levinas terms the *there is*, aside from all reference to Heidegger’s *es gibt*, and even long before the latter had proposed a quite differently structured

analysis of it? The *there is* is one of Levinas' most fascinating propositions. It is his temptation, too, since as the reverse of transcendence it is thus not distinct from it either. Indeed, it is describable in terms of being, but as the *impossibility* of not being, as the incessant insistence of the neutral, the nocturnal murmur of the anonymous, as what never begins (thus, as an-archic, since it eternally eludes the determination of a beginning); it is the absolute, but as absolute indetermination.

All this is captivating; that is, it draws us towards the uncertain outside, endlessly talking outside the truth – in the manner of an Other whom we cannot get rid of simply by labelling him deceitful (the evil genius), or because it would be a joking matter, since this speech, which is only a perfidiously maintained laughter, is nonetheless suggestive. At the same time, this speech escapes all interpretation and is neither gratuitous nor playful. In the end it is sober, but as the illusion of seriousness, and is thus what disturbs us most, since this move is also most apt to deny us the very resources of being itself, such as place and light. Perhaps all this is a gift of literature, and we do not know if it intoxicates while sobering, or if its speech, which charms and disgusts, doesn't ultimately attract us because it promises (a promise it both does and does not keep) to clarify what is obscure in all speech – everything in speech that escapes revelation, manifestation: namely, the remaining trace of nonpresence, what is still opaque in the transparent.

That God, by his highest transcendence, the Good beyond being, must give himself over to this inextricable intrigue and that he may not directly (except by the unheard call to rectitude) cancel what Hegel might have termed the "bad infinite," the endlessly repetitive – all this leaves us faced with a demand that is necessarily our own, precisely because it surpasses us. We are confronted by what, within the ambiguity of the sacred and the holy, of the "temple" and the "theater" renders us spectators-actors-witnesses of the Divine Comedy, where, if we do happen to laugh about it, "the laughter sticks in our throats."

I would like to add an obsessional touch to these several notes. The book that Emmanuel Levinas has entitled *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* is a philosophical work. It would be difficult not to take it as such, since philosophy, even if it concerns discontinuity and rupture, nonetheless solicits us philosophically. This book begins with a dedication, however, that I here transcribe: "*To the memory of those who were closest among the six million assassinated by the National Socialists, and of the millions on millions of all confessions and all nations, victims of the same hatred of the other man, the same antisemitism.*" How can one philosophize, how can one write within the memory of Auschwitz of those who have said, oftentimes in notes buried near the crematoria: know what has happened, don't forget, and at the same time, you won't be able to.

It is this thought that traverses, that bears, the whole of Levinas' philosophy and that he proposes to us without saying it, beyond and before all obligation.

Note

- 1 "We are silent about ourselves." Jean-Luc Nancy recalls this for us in his remarkable *Logodaedalus*. (Paris: Aubier-Flammarion, 1976).

THE RIDDLE OF THE PRE-ORIGINAL

Fabio Ciaramelli

Source: A. Peperzak (ed.) *Ethics as First Philosophy: The Significance of Emmanuel Levinas for Philosophy, Literature and Religion*, New York: Routledge, 1995, pp. 87–94.

Why is Levinas's very notion of the "pre-original" or "pre-originary" an enigmatic one? What does "pre-original" mean? And what does *énigme* mean?

Through the analysis of these questions, I would like to highlight Levinas's claim of the anteriority of the ethical ("ethics as first philosophy," according to his formula) in connection with the originarity of ontology, and consequently of the political.

One could find in Levinas's work numerous quotations concerning the originary character of ontology. Even if ontology is not fundamental (EN 13–24), it is originary and primordial. For instance, in *Otherwise Than Being*, Levinas says that the manifestation of Being, the appearing, is "indeed the primary event" (AE 31; OB 24). Consequently, the ontological Said "in which everything shows itself is the origin . . . of philosophy" (AE 118; OB 192). And according to Husserl's phenomenology—as an accomplishment of the Western philosophical tradition—"in evidence the spirit is the origin of what it receives" (DEHH 24).

But the plexus of such notions—origin, Being, phenomenon—is always followed by another plot, or *intrigue*, that of terms as pre-original, meaning or signification, enigma (DEHH 203–17; CP 61–74). For instance, if the Said is the place of manifestation and therefore the origin of philosophy, signification is nevertheless articulated in the "pre-originary" (AE 108; OB 192). Thus "the very primacy of the primary" is only "in the presence of the present" (AE 31; OB 24), but the pre-originary is not a present, it "occurs as a divergency [*écart*] and a past," a radical past, the past of the other that "must never have been present" (DEHH 210–11; CP 68). In this sense, the pre-originary is in no way a beginning, an *arché*; it does not have the status of a principle, but comes from the dimension of the

“an-archic,” which must be distinguished from that of the “eternal” (AE 30; OB 187–88).

In *Totality and Infinity* Levinas had already said that Infinity “does not first exist, and *then* reveal itself” (TeI xv; TaI 26): in the same way, we must not understand the pre-originary in *Otherwise Than Being* as something which “is” before origin, which is more originary than origin, for instance, a more ancient origin. On the contrary, the pre-originary produces itself as the deconstruction of origin, as its destructurement and interruption. Therefore it precedes the origin only after the event, *après coup*, according to the scheme of what *Totality and Infinity* called the “posteriority of the anterior” (TeI 25; TaI 54). If the anterior only occurs a posteriori, it presupposes—and at the same time escapes or gets out of—origin.

The pre-originary is the dimension of meaning that is irreducible to the dimension of manifestation and in this sense, to the orders of both ontology and politics. The very enigma of the pre-originary is its nonphenomenality interrupting the phenomenal order of appearing, which is in its turn originary. *Otherwise Than Being* stresses very clearly and very strongly that the “origin of appearing [*l’origine de l’apparaître*],” which is “the very origin of an origin [*l’origine même de l’origine*],” is “the apparition of a third party [*l’apparition du tiers*]” (AE 204; OB 160). This apparition is the permanent entry into the intimacy of the face to face, which is not an empirical event but the ontological principle of human society, the constitution of the political. The immediacy of the ethical responsibility for the other—an “immediacy antecedent to questions” (AE 200; OB 157)—is the pre-original meaning that precedes origin without being in its turn origin.

From responsibility to problem: that is the way which Levinas indicates in this section of *Otherwise Than Being*. Here responsibility is not “justice,” because the latter implies that originary “comparison of incomparables [*comparaison des incomparables*]” (AE 201; OB 158 and *passim*) which is absent in the pre-originary dimension of proximity. The slight difference between, on the one hand, the anteriority or precedence of the ethical and, on the other, the originarity of the ontological and of the political generates an insurmountable “anachronism,” an overlapping between two irreducible time orders which collide without coinciding, which stay together in their nonsynchronizable diachrony.

These themes are well known, and it is not necessary to recall them at greater length.¹ Here I would merely like to defend the following thesis: namely, that the riddle of the pre-originary—irreducible to the phenomenon of origin—is the *mise en scène*, the staging—and not the conceptual representation—of a necessary condition of the political (and of its ontological constitution), which is also its limit. The very notion of *mise en scène* is certainly a phenomenological one, but it applies itself to what occurs on the borderline of phenomenology, according to an original gesture that has become familiar to Levinas’s readers.² It allows him to describe the

déformalisation—the signifying concreteness—of what interrupts phenomenology. This interruption of the articulated order of phenomena and beings can only be understood and signified by a step backward that attends to an implication which is on the horizon of manifestation but which makes sense without showing itself.

So the enigma of the pre-original is not a phenomenon, does not occur in a present, is not the activity of a consciousness but insinuates itself within phenomena, as their very condition and their limit.

If the pre-originary is the immediacy of the ethical responsibility before freedom, in what sense does this enigmatic immediacy “stage” the condition and the limit of the political that is in its turn originary?

I would like to show that the enigma of the pre-originary is the deconstruction of the ontological identity of origin, of an inner duality that is always an ontological articulation, a duality within the immanence of origin. In this sense the pre-originary means the opening of origin to a radical alterity that is irreducible to the circle of origin. The radical alterity disturbing the immanence of origin is the very complication of human plurality, its paradox, a paradox that breaks the originary identity of totality.

But what is origin? It means that from which something springs into existence. The search for origin is always transcendental and ontological: it looks for universal conditions of the possibility of Being. But the first thing springing from origin is the origin itself. The *Ur-sprung*, the primordial jump or leap, is one’s emerging from oneself. To be origin, therefore, means to begin in a present, that is, to avoid the causal chain of mediations, interrupting it at its origin, in order to start immediately from oneself without deriving from anything else. But, at this very moment, such an immediacy of origin implies a sort of paradoxical duality, an inner articulation. Levinas evokes it in *De l’existence à l’existant*, in his analysis of the instant that, in its ontological sense, is not instantaneous (DE 129–32; EE 75–77).³ Origin can arise or spring from itself only if it originarily implies a reference to itself as to its own alterity, from which it emerges. Thanks to this inner articulation, thanks to this originary complication of the simple or to this circularity of the initial, origin originarily comes to itself without starting from anywhere. Thus origin, as origin of itself, precedes itself, presupposes itself, as it cannot presuppose anything else that would be only its external starting point. The self-originating origin implies the alterity of itself with regard to itself, an immanent alterity coming to Being in the same movement of the primordial leap.⁴

But this ontological inner duality of origin is not adequate to the genuine complication of human plurality, which implies a radical alterity, irreducible to the alterity immanent to the origin that occurs only as a condition of its totalization.

Totality and Infinity had already stressed the irreducibility of human plurality to totality, in which the same and the other remain correlative.

The paradox of human plurality lies precisely in the impossibility of deducing it from an external origin yet at the same time in the inadequacy of the ontological and immanent duality of origin to do justice to the difference between social pluralism and totality.

This difference can only be safeguarded by a deconstruction of the ontological identity or immanence of origin. And it is precisely the enigma of the pre-original—its irreducibility to a more originary starting point or origin—that stages the condition of the political and its limit. In other words, thanks to this notion of the pre-originary, the political—which does not find its starting point outside of itself, which is in its own dimension originary—can mean a kind of human relationship which is not absorbed by totality, that is, by an anonymous despotism of universality over individuals.

“There exists a tyranny of the universal and of the impersonal,” writes Levinas in *Totality and Infinity*, and, he adds, “an order that is inhuman though distinct from the brutish” (TeI 219; TaI 242). This universal and totalizing order is not given, is not natural, and constitutes itself through the totalization of individuals, through their reduction to empirical moments or elements of a generality. But human society is human precisely because it is “a multiple existing—a pluralism”—distinct from “numerical multiplicity,” that “remains defenseless against totalization” (TeI 195; TaI 220). So we have to think of the political in its difference from such a totalization.

Now, the specific operation of the political in human society is understood by Levinas as the institution of equality among separated and different individuals. It is the institution of an equality that is precisely the result of a “struggle for recognition”: indeed, “politics tends toward reciprocal recognition, that is, toward equality; it ensures happiness. And political law concludes and sanctions the struggle for recognition” (TeI 35; TaI 64). But “politics left to itself bears a tyranny with itself; it deforms the I and the other who have given rise to it, for it judges them according to universal rules, and thus as *in absentia*” (TeI 276; TaI 300). This danger is linked to “politics left to itself,” without reference to the pre-originary meaning implied within its horizon.

But the political, in its difference from tyranny, has to imply the institution of a universal order which is not a totality, which is not a totalization of individuals, which reflects and respects human plurality, that is, pluralism.

Politics—as distinct from totality, distinct from tyranny—is the institution of a society of equals. In *Totality and Infinity* the political operation (the same operation that will be called in *Otherwise Than Being* a “comparison of incomparables”) already has its starting point in the relationship of the face to face with a third party, and we know that this relationship is originary. Levinas writes, “In the measure that the face of the Other relates us with a third party, the metaphysical relation of the I with the Other moves into the form of We, aspires to a State, institutions, laws, which are the source of universality” (TeI 276; TaI 300).

But the difference between the political universality whose "latent birth" (AE 200; OB 157 and *passim*) is the ethical proximity originally troubled by the entry of a third party and the general anonymity of a tyrannical totality is precisely laid bare by a reference to a nonpolitical condition and limit of the political. This is the very role of the pre-originary, which stages the ethical meaning of this condition. We read in *Totality and Infinity*: "The distance which separates happiness from desire separates politics from religion. . . . Religion is Desire and not struggles for recognition. It is the surplus possible in a society of equals, that of glorious humility, responsibility, and sacrifice, which are the condition for equality itself" (TeI 35; TaI 64). I would like to stress strongly this last point: "religion"—in the very sense of "the bond that is established between the same and the other without constituting a totality" (TeI 10; TaI 40)—is a condition for political equality itself. Without this relation among separated terms able to absolve themselves from relation, there would be no equality in human plurality but just the formal totalization of an anonymous generality. This conjuncture in which proximity does not abolish distance is irreducible to totality and always subtends any formal totality (TeI 53; TaI 80–81).

But this conjuncture always presupposed by totality is not in its turn an origin. It precedes origin, it prevents politics from becoming the false communion of totality, and at the same time it does not allow politics to find outside of itself any general criterion for deducing its rules. This last point becomes very clear in *Otherwise Than Being*. The permanent appearance of a third party within the intimacy of the face to face gives birth to the political problem as the problem of justice, as the search for equality. The comparison of incomparables, the becoming equals of individuals who are radically other, is the originary operation of the institution of society. Individuals who are radically other, who are not actually equal to one another, are "equalized" and *become* equals through a comparison which we have to distinguish from a totalization but which we cannot derive from any more originary origin.

Of course, the tyranny of totalization is an ever-present danger, and the very task of a radical reflection on the political has precisely to avoid any reduction of the political to totality. The originary comparison of incomparables is a political operation because it establishes a symbolic order or dimension generated by society but not reducible to the given reality of society. We meet here what Claude Lefort has called the "enigma of society," an enigma related to the "idea of a social order that is of necessity instituted politically [*l'idée d'une nécessaire institution politique du social*],"⁵ which is to say, to the fact that it is impossible "to precipitate what belongs to the symbolic order into the real."⁶

This overlapping of the self-origination of the political and its enigmatic relation to the pre-originary is not a theoretical construction but—still quoting Claude Lefort—"the experience of a difference which is not at a

disposal of human beings . . . ; the experience of a difference which relates human beings to their humanity, and which means that their humanity cannot be self-contained, that it cannot set its own limits, and that it cannot absorb its origins and ends into those limits." Finally this experience implies the acknowledgment that "human society can only open onto itself by being held in an opening it did not create."⁷

The very notion of the pre-originary makes reference to this passivity at the core of the originary self-constitution of human society. It makes reference to the impossible reification of the political, to the unassumable exteriority of society with regard to itself. Beyond and before (*en deçà de*) any constituted social totality, the asymmetric relation to the other as the "religious" or "ethical" condition and limit of the political signifies the impossibility of absorbing in a phenomenological network of relations the invisible source of meaning which escapes manifestation, which has its roots in the absolute past of the other.

Indeed, the other escapes always, gets out of reality, absolves himself or herself from relation. The desire of the other is irreducible to any need that we can satisfy, precisely because the other does not give himself or herself in reality. In this sense, religion—which is the place of such a "Desire of the Other that is our very sociality" (DEHH 193)—would be the symbolic figuration of the exteriority of society with respect to itself.

I would read the enigmatic resort to God, very often or almost always between quotation marks, in the last chapter of *Otherwise than Being* in connection with this search for a symbolic staging of the pre-original condition of the political.

The resort to God alludes to the enigma of the pre-originary implied by the originary constitution of a political space, which is the space of social equality and universal laws. In an earlier article, "The Ego and the Totality," where Levinas says that "'We' is not the plural of 'I,'" he evokes God as "the fixed point exterior to society, from which the law comes" (EN 49, 34; CP 43, 32).

This radical transcendence with regard to society prevents the latter from degenerating into an impersonal totality and offers a figure of the symbolic exteriority of society with regard to itself insofar as this exteriority is precisely irreducible to the inner and immanent duality of the origin. The resort to God in *Otherwise Than Being* occurs as a deconstruction of the originarily ontological character of the political, in order to avoid the neglect of difference in favor of unity or fusional community. "It is only thanks to God that, as a subject incomparable with the other, I am approached as another by the others, that is for myself. . . . The passing of God of whom I can speak only by reference to this aid or to this grace, is precisely the reverting of the comparable subject into a member of society" (AE 201–2; OB 158).

For Levinas the institution of the "original locus of justice"—that is, the political realm which enables the social exchange among separated and

incomparable subjects—is only possible “with the help of God” (AE 204; OB 160). In order to understand this enigmatic resort to God, I propose to read it in connection with the overlapping—*l’empiètement*—of two features of the political: its instituted dimension and its symbolic character. “The help of God” is a way of saying the pre-originary meaning implied and “staged” by this originary operation of doubling, which occurs when society becomes exterior to itself, in order to posit the universal and common plan of justice. The symbolic and instituted exteriority of the social with regard to itself is at the core of the event of the political, by which the face to face, starting from the originary apparition of a third party, “moves into the form of We” (AE 204; OB 160), which has to be distinguished from a plural of I, for otherwise human pluralism would be reduced to an impersonal totality. In this sense, the universality of law comes to itself without having started from outside, but in its self-origination it continues to allude to its “latent birth” in a pre-originary doubling of the social, where its instituted character means the irreducibility of the symbolic order to reality. Therefore social and political equality can institute the phenomenal order of appearing without destroying “the attention to the Other as unicity and face (which the visibleness of the political leaves invisible)” (TeI 276–77; TaI 300). The tyranny of the political thought of in terms of totality is precisely the reduction of the instituted and symbolic order of the political to a neutral anonymity eradicated from its “latent birth” in the pre-originary meaning of the ethical, where proximity and distance go together, where nobody is at the starting point of institution, but where among separated beings the apparition of a third party requires the creation of a common plan, external to the terms of relation without being in its turn a term, without being a projection of one of them, without being objectifiable and reified.

Therefore the resort to God may suggest this necessary implication of a symbolic dimension as the condition and the limit of the political institution of equality. But this condition, because of its pre-originary character, cannot be precipitated into the real, cannot become an ontological *arché*, cannot be reduced to a mythical origin before society or beyond it from which society would be derived as a consequence. The pre-originary is not the origin of origin: “it is a hither side not presupposed like a principle is presupposed by the consequence of which it is synchronous. This an-archic hither side is borne witness to, enigmatically, to be sure, in responsibility for others” (AE 203; OB 160).

The pre-originary is not the ontological essence of the political, but it makes sense only in its “*reprise*” within the social order, where the ethical responsibility for others “deformalizes” the reference to it. And this reference becomes an enigmatic allusion to a symbolic dimension from which no institution is deducible but of which each institution must be a creative “*reprise*.” The political institution of equality must aim at this pre-originary dimension of the ethical, which is the only warranty of its difference from totality.

Notes

- 1 For a more detailed analysis of this point, see Fabio Ciarraelli, "*L'anacronismo*," in E. Levinas and A. Peperzak, *Etica come filosofia prima*, ed. F. Ciarraelli (Milan: Guerini, 1989), 155–80; "Levinas's Ethical Discourse between Individuation and Universality," RL 83–108; "Remarques sur religion et politique chez Levinas," in *Religion, société, démocratie* (Bruxelles: Ousia, forthcoming).
- 2 See, for example, the preface to DVI.
- 3 See also Fabio Ciarraelli, "Il tempo dell'inizio. Responsabilità e giudizio in H. Arendt ed E. Levinas," *Paradigmi* 9 (1991): 477–504.
- 4 For a more general development, see Fabio Ciarraelli, "The Circle of the Origin," in *Political Theory*, ed. S. Watson and L. Lagsdorf (Albany: SUNY Press, forthcoming).
- 5 Claude Lefort, *Ecrits sur le politique* (Paris: Seuil, 1986), 10; *Democracy and Political Theory*, trans. D. Macey (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 3.
- 6 Claude Lefort, *L'invention démocratique* (Paris: Fayard, 1981), 150.
- 7 Lefort, *Ecrits sur le politique*, 262; *Democracy and Political Theory*, 222.

IL Y A – HOLDING LEVINAS'S HAND TO BLANCHOT'S FIRE¹

Simon Critchley

Source: C. B. Gill (ed.) *Maurice Blanchot: The Demand of Writing*, London: Routledge, 1996, pp. 108–22.

Death is not the *noema* of a *noesis*. It is not the object or meaningful fulfilment of an intentional act. Death, or rather, dying, is by definition ungraspable; it is that which exceeds intentionality and the noetico-noematic correlative structures of phenomenology. There can thus be no phenomenology of dying, because it is a state of affairs about which one could neither have an adequate intention nor find intuitive fulfilment. The ultimate meaning of human finitude is that we cannot find meaningful fulfilment for the finite. In this sense, dying is meaningless and, consequently, the work of mourning is infinite (which is to say that mourning is not a Work).

Since direct contact with death would demand the death of the person who entered into contact, the only relation that the living can maintain with death is through a representation, an image, a picture of death, whether visual or verbal. And yet, we immediately confront a paradox: namely that the representation of death is not the representation of a presence, an object of perception or intuition – we cannot draw a likeness of death, a portrait, a still life, or whatever. Thus, representations of death are *misrepresentations*, or rather they are representations of an absence.² The paradox at the heart of the representation of death is perhaps best conveyed by the figure of *prosopopoeia*, that is, the rhetorical trope by which an absent or imaginary person is presented as speaking or acting. Etymologically, *prosopopoeia* means to make a face (*prosopon* + *poien*); in this sense we might think of a death mask or *memento mori*, a form which indicates the failure of presence, a face which withdraws behind the form which presents it.³ In a manner analogous to what Nietzsche writes about the function of *Schein* in *The Birth of Tragedy*, such a *prosopopoeic* image both allows us to glimpse the interminability of dying in the Apollonian mask of the tragic hero and

redeems us from the nauseating contact with the truth of tragedy, the abyss of the Dionysian, the wisdom of Sileaus: 'What is best of all is . . . not to be born, not to *be*, to be *nothing*. But the second best for you is – to die soon.'⁴ I believe that many of the haunting images – or death masks – in Blanchot's *réécits* (I am thinking of the various death scenes in *Thomas the Obscure*, *Death Sentence* and *The Last Man*, but also of the figures of Eurydice or the Sirens) have a prosopopoeic function: they are a face for that which has no face, and they show the necessary inadequacy of our relation to death. To anticipate myself a little, my question to Levinas will be: *must the face of the Other always be a death mask?*

However, as I show elsewhere with reference to Blanchot's reading of Kafka's *Diaries*, the writer's (and philosopher's) relation with death is necessarily self-deceptive: it is a relation with what is believed to be a possibility, containing the possibility of meaningful fulfilment, but which is revealed to be an impossibility.⁵ The infinite time of dying evades the writer's grasp and s/he mistakes *le mourir* for *la mort*, dying for death. Death is disclosed upon the horizon of possibility and thus remains within the bounds of phenomenology or what Levinas would call 'the economy of the Same'. To conceive of death as possibility is to conceive of it as *my* possibility; that is, the relation with death is always a relation with *my* death. As Heidegger famously points out in *Sein und Zeit*, my relation to the death of others cannot substitute for my relation with my own death; death is in each case *mine*.⁶ In this sense, death is a self-relation or even self-reflection that permits the totality of *Dasein* to be grasped. Death is like a mirror in which I allegedly achieve narcissistic self-communion; it is the event in relation to which I am constituted as a Subject. Being-towards-death permits the achievement of authentic selfhood, which, I have argued elsewhere,⁷ repeats the traditional structure of autarchy or autonomy, allowing the self to assume its fate and the community to assume its destiny. One might say that the community briefly but decisively envisaged in Paragraph 74 of *Sein und Zeit* is a community of death, where commonality is found in a sharing of finitude, where individual fates are taken up into a common destiny, where death is the Work of the community.

The radicality of the thought of dying in Blanchot is that death becomes impossible and ungraspable. It is meta-phenomenological. In Levinas's terms, dying belongs to the order of the enigma rather than the phenomenon (which, of course, passes over the complex question whether there can be a phenomenology of the enigmatic or the inapparent). Dying transgresses the boundary of the self's jurisdiction. This is why suicide is impossible for Blanchot: I cannot *want* to die; death is not an object of the will. Thus, the thought of the impossibility of death introduces the possibility of an encounter with some aspect of experience or some state of affairs that is not reducible to the self and which does not relate or return to self; that is to say, something other. The ungraspable facticity of dying establishes an

opening on to a meta-phenomenological alterity, irreducible to the power of the Subject, the will or *Dasein* (as I see it, this is the central argument of *Time and the Other*). Dying is the impossibility of possibility and thus undermines the residual heroism, virility and potency of Being-towards-death. In the infinite time of dying, all possibility becomes impossible, and I am left passive and impotent. Dying is the sensible passivity of senescence, the wrinkling of the skin – crisping: the helplessly ageing face looking back at you in the mirror.

In this way, perhaps (and that is a significant 'perhaps'), the guiding intention of Levinas's work is achieved: namely that if death is not a self-relation, if it does not result in self-communion and the achievement of a meaning to finitude, then this means that a certain plurality has insinuated itself at the heart of the self. The facticity of dying structures the self as Being-for-the-other, as substitution, which also means that death is not revealed in a relation to *my* death but rather in the alterity of death or the death of the Other. As Levinas writes in a late text, it is 'As if the invisible death which the face of the other faces were *my* affair, as if this death regarded me'.⁸

This relation between dying and plurality allows us to raise the question of what vision of community could be derived from this anti-Heideggerian account of dying, from this fundamental axiom of heteronomy. If, as Levinas suggests, the social ideal has been conceived from Plato to Heidegger in terms of fusion, a collectivity that says 'we' and feels the solidarity of the Other at its side, what Nancy calls 'immanentism', then a Levinasian vision of community would be 'a collectivity that is not a communion',⁹ *une communauté désœuvrée*, a community unworked through the irreducibility of plurality that opens in the relation to death. This is a point made by Alphonso Lingis:

Community forms when one exposes oneself to the naked one, the destitute one, the outcast, the dying one. One enters into community not by affirming oneself and one's forces but by exposing oneself to expenditure at a loss, to sacrifice.¹⁰

To conceive of death as possibility is to project on to a future as the fundamental dimension of freedom and, with Heidegger, to establish the future as the basic phenomenon of time. Yet, such a future is always *my* future and *my* possibility, a future ultimately grasped from within the solitary fate of the Subject or the shared destiny of the community. I would claim that such a future is *never future enough for the time of dying*, which is a temporality of infinite delay, patience, senescence or *différance*. Dying thus opens a relation with the future which is always ungraspable, impossible and enigmatic; that is to say, it opens the possibility of a future without me, an infinite future, *a future which is not my future*.¹¹

What is a future that is not my future? It is another future or the future of an Other, that is, the future that is always ahead of me and my projective freedom, that is always to come and from where the basic phenomenon of time arises, what Levinas calls dia-chrony. But what or who is the Other? Does the word 'Other' translate the impersonal *autre* or the personal *autrui*? For Blanchot, writing establishes a relation with alterity that would appear to be strictly impersonal: a relation with the exteriority of *le neutre*. It would seem that the latter must be rigorously distinguished from the personal alterity sought by Levinas, the alterity of *autrui*, which is ultimately the alterity of the child, that is, of the son, and the alterity of illeity, of a (personal) God.¹² It would seem that although the experience of alterity in Blanchot and Levinas opens with the impossibility of death, that is, with their critique of Heidegger's Being-towards-death, one might conclude that there is only a formal or structural similarity between the alterity of the relation to the neuter and the alterity of *autrui* and that it is here that one can draw the line between Levinas and Blanchot. However, in opposition to this, I should like to muddy the distinction between Blanchot and Levinas by tracking an alternative destiny for the *il y a* in Levinas's work and indicating the direction that could be taken by a Blanchot-inspired re-reading of Levinas.

* * *

I show elsewhere that the experience of literature for Blanchot has its source in 'the primal scene' of what he variously calls 'the other night', 'the energy of exteriority prior to law' or 'the impossibility of death', and that this experience can be understood with reference to Levinas's notion of the *il y a*.¹³ However, although Levinas's thinking begins with the *il y a*, which is his deformation of the Heideggerian understanding of Being (an appropriation and ruination of the *Seinsfrage*), his entire subsequent work would seem, on a first reading, to be premised upon the necessity to surmount the *il y a* in order to move on to the hypostasis of the Subject and ultimately the ethical relation to the Other, a relation whose alterity is underwritten by the trace of illeity. In order to establish that ethics is first philosophy (i.e. that philosophy is *first*), Levinas must overcome the neutrality of the *il y a*, the ambiguous instance of literature.

Now, to read Levinas in this way would be to adopt what Paul Davies has called 'a linear narrative',¹⁴ which would begin with one ('bad') experience of neutrality in the *il y a* and end up with another ('good') experience of neutrality in illeity, after having passed through the mediating moments of the Subject and *autrui* (roughly, Sections II and III of *Totality and Infinity*). To read Levinas in this way would be to follow a line from the *il y a* to the Subject, to *autrui*, to illeity. However, the question that must be asked is: can or, indeed, *should* one read Levinas in a linear fashion, as if the

claim to ethics as first philosophy were a linear ascent to a new metaphysical summit, as if *Totality and Infinity* were an anti-Hegelian rewriting of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (which might yet be true at the level of Levinas's intentions)? Is the neutrality of the *il y a* ever decisively surmounted in Levinas's work? And if this is so, why does the *il y a* keep on returning like the proverbial repressed, relentlessly disturbing the linearity of the exposition? Is the moment of the *il y a* — that is to say, the instance of the literary, of rhetoric and ambiguity — in any way reducible or controllable in Levinas's work? Or might one track an alternative destiny of the *il y a*, where it is not decisively surmounted but where it returns to interrupt that work at certain critical moments? Might this not plot a different itinerary for reading Levinas, where the name of Blanchot would function as a clue or key for the entire problematic of literature, writing, neutrality and ambiguity in the articulation of ethics as first philosophy? Is literature ever decisively overcome in the establishment of ethics as first philosophy?

Let me give a couple of instances of this tracking of the *il y a* before provisionally sketching what I see as the important consequences of such a reading.¹⁵

The problem with the *il y a* is that it stubbornly refuses to disappear and that Levinas keeps on reintroducing it at crucial moments in the analysis. It functions like a standing reserve of non-sense from which Levinas will repeatedly draw the possibility of ethical significance, like an incessant buzzing in the ears that returns once the day falls silent and one tries to sleep. To pick a few examples, almost at random: (1) in the 'Phenomenology of eros', the night of the *il y a* appears alongside the night of the erotic, where 'the face fades and the relation to the other becomes a neutral, ambiguous, animal play'.¹⁶ In eros, we move beyond the face and risk entering the twilight zone of the *il y a*, where the relation to the Other becomes profane and language becomes lascivious and wanton, like the speeches of the witches in Macbeth. But, as is well known, the moment of eros, of sexual difference, cannot be reduced or bypassed in Levinas's work, where it functions as what Levinas calls in *Time and the Other* an 'alterity content'¹⁷ that ensures the possibility of fecundity, plurality within Being and consequently the break with Parmenides. (2) More curious is the way in which Levinas will emphasize the possible ambivalence between the impersonal alterity of the *il y a* and the personal alterity of the ethical relation, claiming in 'God and philosophy' that the transcendence of the neighbour is transcendent almost to the point of possible confusion with the *il y a*.¹⁸ (3) Or, again, in the concluding lines of 'Transcendence and intelligibility', at the end of a very conservative and measured restatement of his main lines of argumentation, Levinas notes that the account of subjectivity affected by the unrepresentable alterity of the infinite could be said to announce itself in insomnia, that is to say, in the troubled vigilance of the psyche in the *il y a*.¹⁹ It would appear that Levinas wants to emphasize the sheer radicality of the alterity revealed

in the ethical relation by stressing the possible confusion that the Subject might have in distinguishing between the alterity of the *il y a* and that of illeity, a confusion emphasized by the homophony and linked etymology of the two terms.

In *Existence and Existents*, Levinas recounts the Russian folk-tale of Little John the Simpleton, who throws his father's lunch to his shadow in order to try and slip away from it, only to discover that his shadow still clings to him, like an inalienable companion.²⁰ Is not the place of the *il y a* in Levinas's work like Little John's shadow, stretching mockingly beneath the feet of the philosopher who proclaims ethics as first philosophy? Is not the *il y a* like a shadow or ghost that haunts Levinas's work, a *revenant* that returns it again and again to the moment of nonsense, neutrality and ambiguity, as Banquo's ghost returns Macbeth to the scene of his crime, or like the ghostly return of scepticism after its refutation by reason? Thus, if the *il y a* is the first step on Levinas's itinerary of thought, a neutrality that must be surmounted in the advent of the Subject and *autrui*, then might one not wonder why he keeps stumbling on the first step of a ladder that he sometimes claims to have thrown away? Or, more curiously – and more interestingly – *must* Levinas's thought keep stumbling on this first step in order to preserve the possibility of ethical sense? Might one not wonder whether the ambiguity of the relation between the *il y a* and illeity is essential to the articulation of the ethical in a manner that is analogous to the model of scepticism and its refutation, where the ghost of scepticism returns to haunt reason after each refutation? Isn't this what Levinas means in 'God and philosophy' (but other examples could be cited) when he insists that the alternating rhythm of the Saying and the Said must be substituted for the unity of discourse in the articulation of the relation to the Other?²¹

Which brings me to a hypothesis in the form of a question: might not the *fascination* (a word favoured by Blanchot) that Levinas's writing continues to exert, the way that it captivates us without our ever feeling that we have captured it, be found in the way it keeps open the question of ambiguity, the ambiguity that defines the experience of language and literature itself for Blanchot, the ambiguity of the Saying and the Said, of scepticism and reason, of the *il y a* and illeity, that is also to say – perhaps – of evil and goodness?

(Let us note in passing that there is a certain thematization, perhaps even a staging, of ambiguity in Levinas's later texts. For example, he speaks in *Otherwise than Being* of the beyond of being 'returning and not returning to ontology . . . becoming and not becoming the meaning of being'.²² Or again, in the discussion of testimony in Chapter 5 of the same text,

Transcendence, the beyond essence which is also being-in-the-world, needs ambiguity, a blinking of meaning which is not only a chance certainty, but a frontier both ineffaceable and finer than the outline (*le tracé*) of an ideal line.²³

Transcendence *needs* ambiguity in order for transcendence to 'be' transcendence. But is not this thematization of ambiguity by Levinas an attempt to *control* ambiguity? My query concerns the possibility of such control: might not ambiguity be out of control in Levinas's text?)

What is the place of evil in Levinas's work? If I am right in my suggestion that the *il y a* is never simply left behind or surmounted and that Levinas's work always retains a memory of the *il y a* which could possibly provoke confusion on the part of the Subject between the alterity of the *il y a* and the alterity of illeity, then one consequence of such confusion is the felt ambiguity between the transcendence of evil and that of goodness. On a Levinasian account, what is there to choose experientially between the transcendence of evil and the transcendence of goodness?²⁴ This is not such a strange question as it sounds, particularly if one recalls the way in which ethical subjectivity is described in *Otherwise than Being* . . . in terms of trauma, possession, madness and even psychosis, predicates that are not so distant from the horror of the *il y a*. How and in virtue of what – what criterion, as Wittgenstein would say, or what evidence, as Husserl would say – is one to decide between possession by the good and possession by evil in the way Levinas describes it?

(Of course, the paradox is that there can be no criterion or evidence for Levinas, for this would presume the thematizability or phenomenologizability of transcendence. But this still begs the question of how Levinas convinces his readers: is it through demonstration or persuasion, argumentation or edification, philosophy or rhetoric? Of course, Levinas is critical of rhetoric in conventionally Platonic terms, which commits him, like Plato, to an anti-rhetorical rhetoric, a writing against writing.)

Let me pursue this question of evil by taking a literary example of possession mentioned in passing by Levinas in his discussion of the *il y a*, when he speaks of 'the smiling horror of Maupassant's tales'.²⁵ In Maupassant, as in Poe, it is as though death were never dead enough and there is always the terrifying possibility of the dead coming back to life to haunt us. In particular, I am thinking of the impossibility of murdering the eponymous Horla in Maupassant's famous tale. The Horla is a being that will not die and cannot be killed, and, as such, it exceeds the limit of the human. The Horla is a form of overman, 'after man, the Horla'.²⁶ What takes place in the tale – to suspend the temptation to psychoanalyse – is a case of possession by the Other, an invisible Other with which I am in relation but which continually absolves itself (incidentally, the Horla is always described using the neutral, third-person pronoun – the *il*) from the relation, producing a trauma within the self and an irreducible responsibility. What interests me here is that in Maupassant the possession is clearly intended as a description of possession by evil, but does not this structure of possession by an alterity that can neither be comprehended nor refused closely resemble the structure of ethical subjectivity found in substitution? That is to say, does not the

trauma occasioned in the Subject possessed by evil more adequately describe the ethical Subject than possession by the good? Is it not in the excessive experience of evil and horror – the insurmountable memory of the *il y a* – that the ethical Subject first assumes its shape? Does this not begin to explain why the royal road to ethical metaphysics must begin by making Levinas a master of the literature of horror? But if this is the case, why is radical Otherness goodness? Why is alterity ethical? Why is it not rather evil or anethical or neutral?²⁷

Let us suppose – as I indeed believe – that Levinas offers a convincing account of the primacy of radical alterity, whether it is the alterity of *autrui* in *Totality and Infinity* or the alterity within the Subject described in *Otherwise than Being*. . . Now, how can one conclude from the ‘evidence’ (given that there can be no evidence) for radical alterity that such alterity is goodness? In virtue of what further ‘evidence’ can one predicate goodness of alterity? Is this not, as I suspect, to *smuggle a metaphysical presupposition into a quasi-phenomenological description*? Such a claim is, interestingly, analogous to possible criticisms of the *causa sui* demonstration for the existence of God.²⁸ Let’s suppose that I am convinced that in order to avoid the vertigo of infinite regress (although one might wonder why such regress must be avoided; why is infinite regress bad?) there must be an uncaused cause, but in virtue of what is one then permitted to go on and claim that this uncaused cause is God (who is, moreover, infinitely good)? Where is the argument for the move from an uncaused cause to God *as* the uncaused cause? What necessitates the substantialization of an uncaused cause into a being that one can then predicate with various other metaphysical or divine attributes? Returning the analogy to Levinas, I can see why there has to be a radical alterity in the relation to the Other and at the heart of the Subject in order to avoid the philosophies of totality, but, to play devil’s advocate, I do not see why such alterity then receives the predicate ‘goodness’. Why does radical Otherness have to be determined as good or evil in an absolute metaphysical sense? Could one – and this is the question motivating this critique – accept Levinas’s quasi-phenomenological descriptions of radical alterity whilst suspending or bracketing out their ethico-metaphysical consequences? If one followed this through, then what sort of picture of Levinas would emerge?

The picture that emerges, and which I offer in closing as one possible reading of Levinas, as one way of arguing with him, is broadly consistent with that given by Blanchot in his three conversations on *Totality and Infinity* in *The Infinite Conversation*.²⁹ In the latter work, Blanchot gives his first extended critical attention to a theme central to his *récits*, the question of *autrui* and the nature of the relation to *autrui*. What fascinates Blanchot in his discussion of Levinas is the notion of an absolute relation – *le rapport sans rapport* – that monstrous contradiction (which refuses to recognize the principle of non-contradiction) at the theoretical core of *Totality and Infinity*,

where the terms of the relation simultaneously absolve themselves from the relation. For Blanchot, the absolute relation offers a *non-dialectical account of intersubjectivity*,³⁰ that is, a picture of the relation between humans which is not – *contra* Kojève's Hegel – founded in the struggle for recognition where the self is dependent upon the other for its constitution as a Subject. For Levinas, the interhuman relation is an event of radical asymmetry which resists the symmetry and reciprocity of Hegelian and post-Hegelian models of intersubjectivity (in Sartre and Lacan, for example) through what Levinas calls, in a favourite formulation, 'the curvature of intersubjective space'.³¹

For Blanchot, Levinas restores the strangeness and terror of the interhuman relation as the central concern of philosophy and shows how transcendence can be understood in terms of a social relation. But, and here we move on to Blanchot's discreet critique of Levinas, the absolute relation can *only* be understood socially, and Blanchot carefully holds back from two Levinasian affirmations: first, that the relation to alterity can be understood *ethically* in some novel metaphysical sense, and second, that the relation has *theological* implications (i.e. the trace of illeity). So, in embracing Levinas's account of the relation to *autrui* (in a way which is not itself without problems), Blanchot places brackets around the terms 'ethics' and 'God' and hence holds back from the metaphysical affirmation of the Good beyond Being. Blanchot holds to the ambiguity or tension in the relation to *autrui* that cannot be reduced either through the affirmation of the positivity of the Good or the negativity of Evil. The relation to the Other is neither positive nor negative in any absolute metaphysical sense; it is rather neutral, an experience of neutrality which – importantly – is *not* impersonal and which opens in and as that ambiguous form of language that Blanchot calls literature (if I had the space and competence, it is here that I could begin a reading of Blanchot's *récits* in terms of the absolute relation to the *autrui*).

Where does this leave us? For me, Levinas's essential teaching is the primacy of the human relation as that which can neither be refused nor comprehended and his account of a subjectivity *disposed* towards responsibility, or better, responsivity (*Responsivität* rather than *Verantwortung*, to follow Bernhard Waldenfels's distinction).³² Prior to any metaphysical affirmation of the transcendence of the Good or of the God that arises in this relation, and to which I have to confess myself quite deaf (I have tried hard to listen for many years), what continues to grip me in Levinas is the attention to the Other, to the Other's claim on me and how that claim changes and challenges my self-conception.³³ Now, how is this claim made? Returning to my starting point with the question of death, I should like to emphasize something broached early in Levinas's work, in *Time and the Other*,³⁴ but not satisfactorily pursued to my mind, where the first experience of an alterity that cannot be reduced to the self occurs in the relation

to death, to the ungraspable facticity of dying. Staying with this thought, I should want to claim, with Blanchot, that what opens up in the relation to the alterity of death, of my dying and the Other's dying, is not the transcendence of the Good beyond Being or the trace of God, but the neutral alterity of the *il y a*, the primal scene of emptiness, absence and disaster, what I am tempted to call, rather awkwardly, atheist transcendence.³⁵

We are mortals, you and I. There is only my dying and your dying and nothing beyond. You will die and there is nothing beyond. I shall slowly disappear until my heart stops its soft padding against the lining of my chest. Until then, the drive to speak continues, incessantly. Until then, we carry on. After that there is nothing.

Notes

- 1 This chapter is the development of a long discussion of Blanchot's critical writings, whose focus in his important early essay 'Literature and the right to death', and where I employ Levinas's notion of the *il y a* as a clue to understanding what Blanchot means by literature or writing (see 'Il y a – a dying stronger than death', *Oxford Literary Review*, 15 (1993), pp. 81–131). My suggestion is that the *il y a* is the origin of the artwork. However, the substantive thesis that is introduced in my earlier discussion and developed here concerns the question of death and presupposes the (negative) agreement of Levinas and Blanchot in their critique of Heidegger's conception of death as *Dasein*'s ownmost possibility, as the possibility of impossibility. I try to draw the philosophical consequences of Blanchot's terminological distinction between *la mort* and *le mourir*, death and dying, where the former is synonymous with *possibility* and consequently with the project of grasping the meaning of human finitude, whereas the latter can be identified with *impossibility* and entails the ungraspable facticity of death, where I can no longer lay hold of a meaning for human finitude. My suggestion is simply that the notion of dying yields an approach to human finitude at once more profound, more troubling, less heroic and less virile than that found in *Sein und Zeit*, a suggestion that I make good through a discussion of dying in the work of Samuel Beckett, which will appear in my *Very Little . . . Almost Nothing* (London and New York: Routledge, forthcoming). I owe my title to Gerald Bruns, whose extremely thoughtful remarks greatly aided the revision of this paper for publication. I also owe a debt to Donna Brody, former research student at the University of Essex, who first brought the radicality of the *il y a* to my attention and whose work has been invaluable in thinking through these issues.
- 2 In this regard, see Elisabeth Bronfen's and Sarah Webster Goodwin's interesting introduction to *Death and Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), pp. 3–25, esp. pp. 7, 20.
- 3 This idea is borrowed from J. Hillis Miller's *Versions of Pygmalion* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990); see especially the excellent discussion of Blanchot, 'Death mask: Blanchot's *L'arrêt de mort*', pp. 179–210.
- 4 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. W. Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1967), p. 42.
- 5 See Critchley, 'A dying stronger than death', pp. 120–8. Please note that the reference to Kafka here is to his *Diaries* (cited p. 121) and not to his fiction, which, of course, often says exactly the opposite. Indeed, it would be interesting

- to pursue the theme of the impossibility of death in relation to Kafka's short tale 'Die Sorge des Hausvaters' and the spectral, deathless figure of Odradek (in *Erzählungen* (New York: Schocken, 1967), pp. 170–2).
- 6 *Sein und Zeit*, 15th edn (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1984), p. 240. *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), p. 284. For Levinas's most sustained critique of Heidegger on death, see the recently published lecture series 'La Mort et le temps', in *Emmanuel Levinas: cahier de l'Herne* (Paris: L'Herne, 1991), pp. 21–75. My opposition between death as possibility and impossibility as a way of organizing the difference between Heidegger, on the one hand, and Levinas and Blanchot, on the other, only tells half the story and, as Derrida has shown us, matters are rarely univocal in relation to Heidegger, particularly on the question of death and the entire thematic of authenticity and inauthenticity. For more nuanced accounts of Heidegger on death, see Christopher Fynsk, *Thought and Historicity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986); and Françoise Dastur, *La Mort: essai sur la finitude* (Paris: Hatier, 1994).
 - 7 See 'Prolegomena to any post-deconstructive subjectivity', in *Deconstructive Subjectivities*, ed. S. Critchley and P. Dews (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), pp. 19–20.
 - 8 'Paix et proximité', in *Les Cahiers de la nuit surveillée* 3 (Lagrasse: Verdier, 1984), p. 344.
 - 9 See Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, trans. R. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), p. 84.
 - 10 Alphonso Lingis, *The Community of Those who have Nothing in Common* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 12. A question left unresolved here concerns the relation of death to femininity in Levinas, particularly in *Time and the Other* (pp. 85–8), that is, between the *mystery* of death and the *mystery* of the feminine, and whether, in the light of Elizabeth Bronfen's work, this repeats a persistent masculinist trope (see *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992)). This also entails the related point concerning the extent to which the Levinasian account of plurality is dependent upon his notion of fecundity and hence upon his account of the child, that is to say, the son, and therefore entails a male lineage of community that fails to acknowledge mother–daughter relations (see below, n. 14).
 - 11 I borrow this formulation from Paul Davies. In this regard, see the following passage from 'Meaning and sense': 'To renounce being the contemporary of the triumph of one's work is to envisage this triumph in a *time without me*, to aim at this world below without me, to aim at a time beyond the horizon of my time, in an eschatology without hope for oneself, or in a liberation from my time.
To be *for* a time that would be without me, *for* a time after my time, over and beyond the celebrated "being for death", is not an ordinary thought which is extrapolating from my own duration; it is the passage to the time of the other' (Emmanuel Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. A. Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1987), p. 92).
 - 12 In 'Questions to Emmanuel Levinas: on the divinity of love', in *The Irigaray Reader*, ed. M. Whitford (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), pp. 178–89, Irigaray rightly questions Levinas as to whether the alterity of the child as the future for the father that is not the father's future does not still remain within the sphere of the *pour soi*, where the child is *for* the father, a project beyond his powers of projection, but still *his* project (see esp. p. 181).
 - 13 Critchley, 'A dying stronger than death', pp. 102–20.
 - 14 See 'A linear narrative? Blanchot with Heidegger in the work of Levinas', in *Philosophers' Poets* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 37–69.

- 15 A point of clarification here: in lectures given on Levinas at Essex University in November 1994, Rudi Visker spoke of an 'ethicization of the *il y a*' in Levinas's work. The claim is that the overcoming or surmounting of the *il y a* in the move to the hypostasis of the Subject that characterized Levinas's earlier analyses is abandoned in the later work, where the *il y a* is accorded an ethical significance previously denied to it. Now, there is some truth to this claim, and it would be a question of giving (which I cannot give here) a detailed periodization of the *il y a* across Levinas's work, noting differences of nuance in different texts written at different periods. It is certainly true to say, as Levinas says himself in *Ethique et infini*, that in his later work, although he scarcely speaks of the *il y a* as a theme, 'the shadow of the *il y a* and non-sense still appeared to me necessary as the very ordeal of dis-interestedness' ((Paris: Fayard, 1982), p. 42). The *il y a* is the shadow or spectre of nonsense that haunts ethical sense, but – and this is crucial – ethical sense cannot, in the final instance, be confused or conflated with an-ethical nonsense. The *il y a* is a threat, but it is a threat that must and can be repelled. This would seem to be confirmed by the 1978 Preface to *De l'existence à l'existant*, where, after writing that the *il y a* is the 'principal feature' of the book, he goes on to describe the *il y a* in terms of 'inhuman neutrality' and 'a neutrality to be surmounted' (2nd edn (Paris: Vrin, 1986), pp. 10–11; missing from the English translation by A. Lingis, *Existence and Existents* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1978)). Thus, Levinas's basic philosophical *intention* does not alter, but whether his *text* is saying something at odds with this intention is another matter.
- 16 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. A. Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), p. 263.
- 17 Levinas, *Time and the Other*, p. 36.
- 18 See *Collected Philosophical Papers*, pp. 165–6: 'And this implies that God is not simply the "first other", the "other par excellence", or the "absolutely other", other than the other (*autrui*), other otherwise, other with an alterity prior to the alterity of the other (*autrui*), prior to the ethical bond with the other (*autrui*) and different from every neighbour, transcendent to the point of absence, to the point of a possible confusion with the stirring of the *il y a*.'
- 19 *Transcendence et intelligibilité* (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1984), p. 29; trans. S. Critchley and T. Wright in *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), p. 159: 'But perhaps this theology already announces itself in the very wakefulness of insomnia, in the vigil and troubled vigilance of the psyche before the moment when the finitude of being, wounded by the infinite, is prompted to gather itself into the hegemonic and atheist Ego of knowledge.'
- 20 See Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, p. 28.
- 21 Levinas, 'God and philosophy', in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, p. 173.
- 22 Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. A. Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), p. 19.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 152.
- 24 Levinas goes some way to discussing this question in 'Transcendence and evil' in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, pp. 175–86, where, although Levinas recognizes the 'non-integratability' (p. 180) or excess of evil, the horror of evil is understood by Levinas as the horror of evil in the other man and, hence, as the breakthrough of the Good (p. 185) and the 'approach of the infinite God' (p. 186).
- 25 Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, p. 60.
- 26 Guy de Maupassant, *Contes et nouvelles*, ed. L. Forestier (Paris: Gallimard, 1979), pp. 913–38, esp. p. 938; *Selected Short Stories*, trans. R. Colet (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1971), pp. 313–44, esp. p. 344.

- 27 Several years ago, I corresponded with Michel Haar after some discussions we had at the Collegium Phaenomenologicum in Perugia, where I had tried to explain my fascination with Levinas. He wrote, and I recall from a memory long troubled by his words, 'Je ne vois pas qu'il y a éthique dès qu'il y a altérité' ('I don't see why there is ethics since there is alterity'). For Haar's powerful critique of Levinas, see 'L'Obsession de l'autre: l'éthique comme traumatisme', *Emmanuel Levinas: cahier de l'Herne*, pp. 444–53.
- 28 I owe this analogy to a conversation with Jay Bernstein.
- 29 Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. and Foreword by Susan Hanson (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), pp. 49–74. In this context I shall have to pass over the interesting and difficult question of whether Blanchot's relation to Levinas alters in *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), which might justifiably be approached as a deeply sympathetic but subtly reconstructive reading of Levinas's *Otherwise than Being*.
- 30 Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, pp. 70–1.
- 31 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 291.
- 32 See Bernhard Waldenfels, *Ordnung in Zwielicht* (Frankfurt-am-Main: Suhrkamp, 1987).
- 33 After the thoughts contained here were already loosely formulated, I made the happy discovery that many of my claims are strikingly similar to those proposed by John D. Caputo in his attempt to think obligation without reference to any substantive ethics. See his *Against Ethics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).
- 34 See Levinas, Lecture III in *Time and the Other*, pp. 67–79.
- 35 Blanchot's reservations on the subject of whether the neuter can be described as transcendent should be noted here. In *The Infinite Conversation*, he writes, 'One of the essential traits of the neutral, in fact, is that it does not allow itself to be grasped either in terms of immanence or in terms of transcendence, drawing us into an entirely different sort of relation' (p. 463).

VIOLENCE AND METAPHYSICS

An essay on the thought of Emmanuel Levinas¹

Jacques Derrida

Source: J. Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, tr. Alan Bass, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978, pp. 79–153. Originally published in French in 1967 as “L’écriture et la différence”.

Hebraism and Hellenism,—between these two points of influence moves our world. At one time it feels more powerfully the attraction of one of them, at another time of the other; and it ought to be, though it never is, evenly and happily balanced between them.

(Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*)

That philosophy died yesterday, since Hegel or Marx, Nietzsche, or Heidegger—and philosophy should still wander toward the meaning of its death—or that it has always lived knowing itself to be dying (as is silently confessed in the shadow of the very discourse which *declared philosophia perennis*); that philosophy died *one day*, *within* history, or that it has always fed on its own agony, on the violent way it opens history by opposing itself to nonphilosophy, which is its past and its concern, its death and wellspring; that beyond the death, or dying nature, of philosophy, perhaps even because of it, thought still has a future, or even, as is said today, is still entirely to come because of what philosophy has held in store; or, more strangely still, that the future itself has a future—all these are unanswerable questions. By right of birth, and for one time at least, these are problems put to philosophy as problems philosophy cannot resolve.

It may even be that these questions are not *philosophical*, are not *philosophy's* questions. Nevertheless, these should be the only questions today capable of founding the community, within the world, of those who are still called philosophers; and called such in remembrance, at very least, of the fact that these questions must be examined unrelentingly, despite the diaspora of institutes and languages, despite the publications and techniques

that follow on each other, procreating and accumulating by themselves, like capital or poverty. A community of the question, therefore, within that fragile moment when the question is not yet determined enough for the hypocrisy of an answer to have already initiated itself beneath the mask of the question, and not yet determined enough for its voice to have been already and fraudulently articulated within the very syntax of the question. A community of decision, of initiative, of absolute initiality, but also a threatened community, in which the question has not yet found the language it has decided to seek, is not yet sure of its own possibility within the community. A community of the question about the possibility of the question. This is very little—almost nothing—but within it, today, is sheltered and encapsulated an unbreachable dignity and duty of decision. An unbreachable responsibility. Why unbreachable? Because the impossible has *already* occurred. The impossible according to the totality of what is questioned, according to the totality of beings, objects and determinations, the impossible according to the history of facts, has occurred: there is a history of the question, a pure memory of the pure question which in its possibility perhaps authorizes all inheritance and all pure memory in general and as such. The question has already begun—we know it has—and this strange certainty about an *other* absolute origin, an other absolute decision that has secured the past of the question, liberates an incomparable instruction: the discipline of the question. Through (through, that is to say that we must *already* know how to read) this discipline, which is not yet even the inconceivable tradition of the negative (of negative determination), and which is completely previous to irony, to maieutics, to *epoché*, and to doubt, an injunction is announced: the question must be maintained. As a question. The liberty of the question (double genitive)² must be stated and protected. A founded dwelling, a realized tradition of the question remaining a question. If this commandment has an ethical meaning, it is not in that it belongs to the *domain* of the ethical, but in that it ultimately authorizes every ethical law in general. There is no stated law, no commandment, that is not addressed to a freedom of speech. There is therefore neither law nor commandment which does not confirm and *enclose*—that is, does not dissimulate by presupposing it—the possibility of the question. Thus, the question is always enclosed; it never appears immediately as such, but only through the hermetism of a proposition in which the answer has already begun to determine the question. The purity of the question can only be indicated or recalled through the difference of a hermeneutical effort.

Thus, those who look into the possibility of philosophy, philosophy's life and death, are already engaged in, already overtaken by the dialogue of the question about itself and with itself; they always act in remembrance of philosophy, as part of the correspondence of the question with itself. Essential to the destiny of this correspondence, then, is that it comes to speculate, to reflect, and to question about itself within itself. This is where the

objectification, secondary interpretation, and determination of the question's own history in the world all begin; and this is where the combat embedded in the difference between the question in general and "philosophy" as a determined—finite and mortal—moment or mode of the question itself also begins. The difference between philosophy as a power and adventure *of* the question itself and philosophy as a determined event or turning point *within* this adventure.

This difference is better conceived today. That this difference has come to light, has been conceptualized *as such*, is doubtless an unnoticed and inessential sign for the historian of facts, techniques, and ideas. But, understood in all its implications, it is perhaps the most deeply inscribed characteristic of our age. And would not better thinking this difference be knowing that if something is still to transpire within the tradition by which philosophers always know themselves to be overtaken, then the tradition's origin will have to be summoned forth and adhered to as rigorously as possible? Which is not to stammer and huddle lazily in the depths of childhood, but precisely the opposite.

Close to us and since Hegel, in his mighty shadow, the two great voices which have ordered us to this total repetition—which itself has recalled us to ourselves and has been acknowledged as of utmost philosophical urgency—are those of Husserl and Heidegger. Despite the most profound dissimilarities, the appeal to tradition—which is in no way traditional—is shaped by an intention common to Husserlian phenomenology and to what we will call provisionally, by approximation and for reasons of economy, Heideggerean "ontology."³

Thus, very briefly:

1. The entirety of philosophy is conceived on the basis of its Greek source. As is well known, this amounts neither to an occidentalism, nor to a historicism.⁴ It is simply that the founding concepts of philosophy are primarily Greek, and it would not be possible to philosophize, or to speak philosophically, outside this medium. That Plato, for Husserl, was the founder of a reason and a philosophical task whose telos was still sleeping in the shadows; or that for Heidegger, on the contrary, Plato marks the moment at which the thought of Being forgets itself and is determined as philosophy—this difference is decisive only at the culmination of a common root which is Greek. The difference is fraternal in its posterity, entirely submitted to the same domination. Domination of the same too, which will disappear neither in phenomenology nor in "ontology."
2. The archaeology to which Husserl and Heidegger lead us by different paths entails, for both, a subordination or transgression, in any event a *reduction of metaphysics*. Even though, for each, this gesture has an entirely different meaning, or at least does so apparently.

3. Finally, the category of the *ethical* is not only dissociated from metaphysics but coordinated with something other than itself, a previous and more radical function. When ethics is not treated this way, when law, the power of resolution, and the relationship to the other are once more part of the *archia*, they lose their ethical specificity.⁵

These three motifs arrayed at the unique source of the unique philosophy would indicate the only possible direction to be taken by any philosophical resource in general. Any possible dialogue between Husserlian phenomenology and Heideggerean "ontology," at every point where they are more or less directly implicated, can be understood only from within the Greek tradition. At the moment when the fundamental conceptual system produced by the Greco-European adventure is in the process of taking over all of humanity, these three motifs would predetermine the totality of the logos and of the worldwide historico-philosophical situation. No philosophy could possibly dislodge them without first succumbing to them, or without finally destroying itself as a philosophical language. At a historical depth which the science and philosophies of history can only presuppose, we know that we are consigned to the security of the Greek element; and we know it with a knowledge and a confidence which are neither habitual nor comfortable but, on the contrary, permit us to experience torment or distress in general. For example, the consciousness of crisis is for Husserl but the provisional, almost necessary covering up of a transcendental motif which in Descartes and in Kant was already beginning to accomplish the Greek aim: philosophy as science. When Heidegger says that "for a long time, too long, thought has been desiccated," like a fish out of water, the element to which he wishes to return thought is still—already—the Greek element, the Greek thought of Being, the thought of Being whose irruption or call produced Greece. The knowledge and security of which we are speaking are therefore not in the world: rather, they are the possibility of our language and the nexus of our world.

It is at this level that the thought of Emmanuel Levinas can make us tremble.

At the heart of the desert, in the growing wasteland, this thought, which fundamentally no longer seeks to be a thought of Being and phenomenality, makes us dream of an inconceivable process of dismantling and dispossession.

1. In Greek, in our language, in a language rich with all the alluvia of its history—and our question takes shape already—in a language that admits to its powers of seduction while playing on them unceasingly, this thought summons us to a dislocation of the Greek logos, to a dislocation of our identity, and perhaps of identity in general; it summons us to depart from the Greek site and perhaps from every site in general, and to move toward what is no longer a source or a site (too welcoming to the gods), but toward an *exhalation*, toward a prophetic speech already emitted not only nearer to

the source than Plato or the pre-Socratics, but inside the Greek origin, close to the other of the Greek (but will the other of the Greek be the non-Greek? Above all, can it be *named* the non-Greek? And our question comes closer.) A thought for which the entirety of the Greek logos has already erupted, and is now a quiet topsoil deposited not over bedrock, but around a more ancient volcano. A thought which, without philology and solely by remaining faithful to the immediate, but buried nudity of experience itself, seeks to liberate itself from the Greek domination of the Same and the One (other names for the light of Being and of the phenomenon) as if from oppression itself—an oppression certainly comparable to none other in the world, an ontological or transcendental oppression, but also the origin or alibi of all oppression in the world. A thought, finally, which seeks to liberate itself from a philosophy fascinated by the “visage of being that shows itself in war” which “is fixed in the concept of totality which dominates Western philosophy” (*Totality and Infinity* [hereafter *TI*], p. 21).

2. This thought nevertheless seeks to define itself, in its primary possibility, as metaphysical (a Greek notion however, if we follow the vein of our question). A metaphysics that Levinas seeks to raise up from its subordinate position and whose concept he seeks to restore in opposition to the entire tradition derived from Aristotle.

3. This thought calls upon the ethical relationship—a nonviolent relationship to the infinite as infinitely other, to the Other⁶—as the only one capable of opening the space of transcendence and of liberating metaphysics. And does so without supporting ethics and metaphysics by anything other than themselves, and without making them flow into other streams at their source.

In question, therefore, is a powerful will to explication of the history of Greek speech. Powerful because, if this attempt is not the first of its kind, it reaches a height and a level of penetration in its dialogue at which the Greeks—and foremost among them the two Greeks named Husserl and Heidegger—are called upon to respond. If the messianic eschatology from which Levinas draws inspiration seeks neither to assimilate itself into what is called a philosophical truism, nor even to “complete” (*TI*, p. 22) philosophical truisms, nevertheless it is developed in its discourse neither as a theology, nor as a Jewish mysticism (it can even be understood as the trial of theology and mysticism); neither as a dogmatics, nor as a religion, nor as a morality. In the last analysis it never bases its authority on Hebraic theses or texts. It seeks to be understood from within a *recourse to experience itself*. Experience itself and that which is most irreducible within experience: the passage and departure toward the other; the other itself as what is most irreducibly other within it: Others. A recourse not to be confused with what has always been called a philosophical enterprise, but which reaches a point at which an exceeded philosophy cannot not be brought into question. Truthfully, messianic eschatology is never mentioned literally: it is but a question

of designating a space or a hollow within naked experience where this eschatology can be understood and where it must resonate. This hollow space is not an opening among others. It is opening itself, the opening of opening, that which can be enclosed within no category or totality, that is, everything within experience which can no longer be described by traditional concepts, and which resists every philosopheme.

What do this explication and this reciprocal surpassing of two origins and two historical speeches signify? Do a new élan and some strange community begin to take shape, without being the spiraling return of Alexandrian promiscuity? If we recall that Heidegger, too, seeks to open the passageway to a former speech which, supporting itself from within philosophy, carries us to the outer or inner reaches of philosophy, what do this other speech and this other passageway signify here? It is this space of interrogation that we have chosen for a very partial⁷ reading of Levinas's work. Of course it is not our intention to explore this space, even in the name of a timid beginning. Faintly and from afar, we will only attempt to point it out. First of all, in the style of commentary, we will try to remain faithful to the themes and audacities of a thought—and this despite several parentheses and notes which will enclose our perplexity. Faithful also to its history, whose patience and anxiety capitulate and carry within themselves the reciprocal interrogation of which we wish to speak.⁸ Then we will attempt to ask several questions. If they succeed in approaching the heart of this explication, they will be nothing less than objections, but rather the questions put to *us* by Levinas.

We have just spoken of "themes" and of the "history of a thought." The difficulty is classical and concerns not only method. The brevity of these pages will only intensify it. We will not choose. We will refuse to sacrifice the history of Levinas's thought and works to the order or aggregate of themes—which must not be called a system—assembled and enriched in the great book *Totality and Infinity*. And if we must, for once, have faith in him who stands most accused in the trial conducted by this book, the result is nothing without its becoming.⁹ But neither will we sacrifice the self-coherent unity of intention to the becoming, which then would be no more than pure disorder. We will not choose between the opening and the totality. Therefore we will be incoherent, but without systematically resigning ourselves to incoherence. The possibility of the impossible system will be on the horizon to protect us from empiricism. Without reflecting here upon the philosophy of this hesitation, let us note between parentheses that by simply articulating it we have already come close to Levinas's own problematic.

I The violence of light

The departure from Greece was discreetly premeditated in *Théorie de l'intuition dans la phénoménologie de Husserl*. In France, in 1930, this was the first major work devoted to the entirety of Husserl's thought. Through a

remarkable exposition of the developments of phenomenology, such as were then available from the published works and teachings of the master, and through precautions which already acknowledged the "surprises" that Husserl's meditations and unpublished works might "hold in store," a reticence was announced. The imperialism of *theoria* already bothered Levinas. More than any other philosophy, *phenomenology*, in the wake of Plato, was to be struck with light. Unable to reduce the last naïveté, the naïveté of the glance, it predetermined Being as object.¹⁰

At this point, the accusation remains timid and is not of a piece.

(a) First, it is difficult to maintain a philosophical discourse against light. And thirty years later, when the charges against theoretism and (Husserlian) phenomenology became the essential motifs in the break with tradition, the nudity of the face of the other—this epiphany of a certain non-light before which all violence is to be quieted and disarmed—will still have to be exposed to a certain enlightenment. Especially as concerns the violence implicit in phenomenology.

(b) Next, it is difficult to overlook the fact that Husserl so little predetermined Being as object that in *Ideas I* absolute existence is accorded only to pure consciousness. True, it has often been argued that the difference hardly counts, and that a philosophy of consciousness is always a philosophy of the object. Levinas's reading of Husserl on this point has always been nuanced, supple, contrasted. As early as in the *Theory of Intuition*, theory is correctly distinguished from objectivity in general. As we shall see later, practical, axiological, etc., consciousness is for Husserl too a consciousness of the object. Levinas openly acknowledges this. Therefore, the accusation is really directed against the irreducible primacy of the subject-object correlation. But, later, Levinas will insist more and more on those aspects of Husserlian phenomenology which take us to the inner or outer reaches of the "subject-object correlation." For example, this would be "intentionality as a relationship with otherness," as an "exteriority which is not objective," sensibility, passive genesis, the movement of temporalization, etc.¹¹

(c) Further, for Levinas the sun of the *epekeina tes ousias* will always illuminate the pure awakening and inexhaustible source of thought (*TI*, p. 127). It is not only the Greek ancestor of the Infinite which transcends totality (the totality of being or of *noema*, the totality of the same or the ego),¹² but is also the instrument of destruction for the phenomenology and ontology subjected to the neutral totality of the Same as Being or as Ego. All the essays in 1947 grouped under the title *De l'existence à l'existant* will be placed under the sign of "the Platonic formulation placing the Good beyond Being." (In *Totality and Infinity* the "Phenomenology of Eros" describes the movement of the *epekeina tes ousias* in the very experience of the caress.) In 1947 Levinas calls this movement, which is not theological, not a transcendence toward "a superior existence," "ex-cendence." With a foothold in being, ex-cendence is a "departure from being and from the categories

which describe it." This ethical excedence designates the site—rather the non-site—of metaphysics as metatheology, metaontology, metaphenomenology. We will have to return to this reading of the *epekeina tes ousias* and its relationship to ontology. Since we are speaking of light, let us note for the moment that the Platonic movement is interpreted such that it leads no longer to the sun but even beyond light and Being, beyond the light of Being. "We thus encounter *in our own way* the Platonic idea of the Good beyond Being," we read at the end of *Totality and Infinity* (p. 293—my italics), concerning creation and fecundity. *In our own way*, which is to say that ethical excedence is not projected toward the neutrality of the good, but toward the Other, and that which (is) *epekeina tes ousias* is not essentially light but fecundity or generosity. Creation is but creation of the other; it can be only as paternity, and the relations of the father to son escape all the logical, ontological, and phenomenological categories in which the absoluteness of the other is necessarily the same. (But did not the Platonic sun already enlighten the visible sun, and did not excedence play upon the meta-phor of these two suns? Was not the Good the necessarily nocturnal source of all light? The light of light beyond light. The heart of light is black, as has often been noticed.¹³ Further, Plato's sun does not only enlighten: it engenders. The good is the father of the visible sun which provides living beings with "creation, growth and nourishment" *Republic*, 508a–509b.)

(d) Finally, Levinas is certainly quite attentive to everything in Husserl's analyses which tempers or complicates the primordially of theoretical consciousness. In a paragraph devoted to *nontheoretical consciousness*, it is acknowledged that the primacy of objectivity in general is not necessarily confused, in *Ideas I*, with the primacy of the theoretical attitude. There are nontheoretical acts and objects "of a new and irreducible ontological structure." "For example, says Husserl, the act of valorization constitutes an *axiological* object (*Gegenständlichkeit*), specific in relation to the world of things; constitutes a being from a new region." Levinas also admits on several occasions that the importance accorded to theoretical objectivity has to do with the transcendental guide most often chosen in *Ideas I*: the perception of extended things. (However, we already know that this guide could be only a provisional example.)

Despite all these precautions, despite a constant oscillation between the letter and the spirit of Husserlianism (the former most often contested in the name of the latter),¹⁴ and despite Levinas's insistence upon what is called a "fluctuation in Husserl's thought," a break not to be reconsidered is signified. The phenomenological reduction, whose "historical role . . . is not even a problem" for Husserl, remains a prisoner of the natural attitude which is possible "in the extent to which the latter is theoretical."¹⁵ "Husserl gives himself the liberty of theory as he gives himself theory itself." Chapter 4 of *La conscience théorique* designates, within a compressed and nuanced

analysis, the point of departure: one cannot simultaneously maintain the primacy of the objectifying act and the irreducible originality of nontheoretical consciousness. And if "the conception of consciousness in the 5th *Untersuchung* seems to us not only to affirm a primacy of theoretical consciousness, but sees it as the only access to what creates the *being* of the object," if "the existing world, which is revealed to us, has the mode of existence of the object given over to the theoretical glance," if "the real world is the world of knowledge," if "in his [Husserl's] philosophy . . . knowledge and representation¹⁶ is not a mode of life to the same degree as the others, nor a secondary mode," then "we will have to take our leave."

One already foresees the unease to which a thought rejecting the excellence of theoretical rationality will have to resign itself later, especially in that it never ceases to appeal to the most uprooted rationalism and universalism against the violences of mysticism and history, against the ravishing of enthusiasm and ecstasy. One foresees too, the difficulties of a progression which leads to a metaphysics of separation through a reduction of theoretism. For separation, distance or impassiveness heretofore have been the targets of the classical objections against theoretism and objectivism. On the contrary, there will be more force—and danger—in denouncing the blindness of theoretism, its inability to depart from itself towards absolute exteriority, towards the totally-other, the infinitely-other "more objective than objectivity" (*TI*). The complicity of theoretical objectivity and mystical communion will be Levinas's true target. The premetaphysical unity of one and the same violence. An alternation which always modifies the same confinement of the other.

In 1930 Levinas turns toward Heidegger against Husserl. *Sein und Zeit* is published, and Heidegger's teaching begins to spread. Everything which overflows the commentary and "letter" of Husserl's texts moves toward "ontology," "in the very special sense Heidegger gives to the term" (*Théorie de l'intuition* [hereafter *THI*]). In his critique of Husserl, Levinas retains two Heideggerean themes: (1) despite "the idea, so profound, that in the ontological order the world of science is posterior to the concrete and vague world of perception, and depends upon it," Husserl "perhaps was wrong to see in this concrete world, a world of perceived objects above all" (*THI*). Heidegger goes further, since for him this world is not primarily given over to the glance, but is rather—and we wonder whether Heidegger would have accepted this formulation—"in its very Being like a center of action, a field of activity or of *solicitude*" (*ibid.*). (2) if Husserl was right in his opposition to historicism and naturalistic history, he neglected "the historical situation of man . . . understood in another sense."¹⁷ There exist a historicity and a temporality of man that are not only predicates but "the very substantiality of his substance." It is "this structure . . . which occupies such an important place in Heidegger's thought" (*ibid.*).

One already foresees the unease to which a thought rejecting the excellence of a "philosophy" which "appears . . . as independent of man's historical situation as a theory seeking to consider everything *sub specie aeternitatis*" (*THI*) will have to resign itself later, especially in that it never ceases to call upon the "eschatology" which like experience "as the 'beyond' of history withdraws beings from history's jurisdiction." There is no contradiction here but rather a displacement of concepts—in this case the concept of history—which we must follow. Perhaps then the appearance of contradiction will vanish as the fantasy of a philosophy enveloped in its own fundamental conceptions. A contradiction according to what Levinas often will call "formal logic."

Let us follow this displacement. The respectful, moderate reproach directed against Husserl in a Heideggerean style will soon become the main charge of an indictment this time directed against Heidegger, and made with a violence that will not cease to grow. Certainly it is not a question of denouncing as militant theoretism a thought which, in its initial act, refused to treat the self-evidence of the object as its ultimate recourse; a thought for which the historicity of meaning, according to Levinas's own terms, "destroys clarity and constitution as authentic modes of the existence of the mind" (*En découvrant l'existence* [hereafter *EDE*]); and for which, finally, "the self-evident is no longer the fundamental mode of intellection," for which "existence is irreducible to the light of the self-evident" and "the drama of existence" is played out "before light" (*ibid.*). Nevertheless, at a singular depth—but the fact and the accusation are made only more significant by it—Heidegger still would have questioned and reduced theoretism from within, and in the name of, a Greco-Platonic tradition under the surveillance of the agency of the glance and the metaphor of light. That is, by the spatial pair inside-outside (but is this, in all its aspects, a *spatial* pair?) which gives life to the opposition of subject and object. By allegedly reducing this last schema, Heidegger would have retained what made it possible and necessary: light, unveiling, comprehension or precomprehension. This what the texts written after *En découvrant l'existence* tell us. "Heideggerean care, illuminated as it is by comprehension (even if comprehension offers itself as care), is already determined by the structure 'inside-outside' that characterizes light." In making the structure "inside-outside" tremble at the point where it would have resisted Heidegger, Levinas in no way pretends to erase it, or to deny its meaning and existence. Nor does he do so, moreover, when the opposition subject-object or cogito-cogitatum is in question. In the style by which strong and faithful thought is recognized (this is Heidegger's style too), Levinas respects the zone or layer of traditional truth; and the philosophies whose presuppositions he describes are in general neither refuted nor criticized. Here, for example, it is a question simply of revealing beneath this truth, as that which founds it and is dissimulated within it, "a situation which precedes the division of Being into

an inside and an outside." However it is also a question of inaugurating, in a way that is to be new, quite new, a metaphysics of radical separation and exteriority. One anticipates that this metaphysics will have some difficulty finding its language in the medium of a traditional logos entirely governed by the structure "inside-outside," "interior-exterior."

Thus, "without being knowledge, Heidegger's temporality is ecstasy, 'being outside itself.' Not a transcendence of theory, but already deportation from an interior toward an exterior." The structure of *Mitsein*¹⁸ itself will be interpreted as a Platonic inheritance, belonging to the world of light. In effect, through the experience of eros and paternity, through the waiting for death, there should arise a relationship to the other which can no longer be understood as a modification of "the Eleatic notion of Being" (*Le temps et l'autre* [hereafter *TA*]). The latter would demand that multiplicity be included in, subjected to, the domination of unity. And it would still govern Plato's philosophy, according to Levinas, even unto its concept of femininity (conceived as matter in the categories of activity and passivity) and its concept of the city-state which "must imitate the world of ideas."

"It is . . . toward a pluralism which does not fuse into unity that we wish to make our way; and, if it can be dared, to break with Parmenides" (*TA*). Thus, Levinas exhorts us to a second parricide. The Greek father who still holds us under his sway must be killed; and this is what a Greek—Plato—could never resolve to do, deferring the act into a hallucinatory murder. A hallucination within the hallucination that is already speech. But will a non-Greek ever succeed in doing what a Greek in this case could not do, except by disguising himself as a Greek, by *speaking* Greek, by feigning to speak Greek in order to get near the king? And since it is a question of killing a speech, will we ever know who is the last victim of this stratagem? Can one feign speaking a language? The Eleatic stranger and disciple of Parmenides had to give language its due for having vanquished him: shaping non-Being according to Being, he had to "say farewell to an unnamable opposite of Being" and had to confine non-Being to its relativity to Being, that is to the movement of alterity.

Why was the repetition of the murder necessary according to Levinas? Because the Platonic gesture will be ineffectual for as long as multiplicity and alterity are not understood as the absolute *solitude* of the *existent* in its *existence*. These are the translations of *Seiendes* and *Sein* chosen by Levinas at this point "for reasons of euphony" (*TA*).¹⁹ This choice will always retain a certain ambiguity: by *existent*, in effect, Levinas almost if not always understands the being which is man, being in the form of *Dasein*. Now, thus understood, the existent is not being (*Seiendes*) in general, but refers to what Heidegger calls *Existenz*—mainly because it has the same root—that is "the mode of Being, and precisely, the Being of the being which keeps itself open for the aperture of Being, and within it." "Was bedeutet 'Existenz' in *Sein* und *Zeit*? Das wort nennt eine Weise des *Seins*, und zwar das *Sein*

desjenigen Seienden, das often steht für die Offenheit des Seins, in der es steht, indem es sie aussteht" (Introduction to *Was ist Metaphysik*).

Now this solitude of the "existent" in its "existence" would be primordial and could not be conceived on the basis of the neutral unity of *existence* which Levinas often and profoundly describes under the heading of the "there is." But is not the "there is" the totality of indeterminate, neutral, anonymous beings rather than Being itself? The theme of the "there is" calls for systematic confrontation with Heidegger's allusions to the "*es gibt*" (*Being and Time*, *Letter on Humanism*), and for a confrontation too, of terror, which Levinas opposes to Heideggerian anguish, with the experience of fright, which Heidegger says, in the *Nachwort* to *Was ist Metaphysik*, "always resides near essential anxiety."

The relationship to the other arises from the depths of this solitude. Without it, without this primordial secret, parricide is philosophy's theatrical fiction. To understand the secret on the basis of the unity of existence, on the pretext that it *exists* or that it *is* the secret of the existent, "is to confine oneself to unity, and to let Parmenides escape every parricide" (*TA*). Therefore, Levinas henceforth will move toward a thought of original difference. Is this thought in contradiction with Heidegger's intentions? Is there a difference between this difference and the difference of which Heidegger speaks? Is their juxtaposition anything but verbal? And which difference is more original? We will consider these questions later.

A world of light and of unity, a "philosophy of a world of light, a world without time." In this heliopolitics "the social ideal will be sought in an ideal of fusion . . . the subject . . . losing himself in a collective representation, in a common ideal. . . . It is the collectivity which says 'us,' and which, turned toward the intelligible sun, toward the truth, experience, the other at his side and not face to face with him. . . . *Miteinandersein* also remains the collectivity of the with, and its authentic form is revealed around the truth." Now, "we hope to show, for our part, that it is not the preposition *mit* which must describe the original relation with the other." Beneath solidarity, beneath companionship, before *Mitsein*, which would be only a derivative and modified form of the originary relation with the other, Levinas already aims for the face-to-face, the encounter with the face. "Face to face without intermediary" and without "communion." Without intermediary and without communion, neither mediate nor immediate, such is the truth of our relation to the other, the truth to which the traditional logos is forever inhospitable. This unthinkable truth of living experience, to which Levinas returns ceaselessly, cannot possibly be encompassed by philosophical speech without immediately revealing, by philosophy's own light, that philosophy's surface is severely cracked, and that what was taken for its solidity is its rigidity. It could doubtless be shown that it is in the nature of Levinas's writing, at its decisive moments, to move along these cracks, masterfully progressing by negations, and by negation against negation.

Its proper route is not that of an "either this . . . or that," but of a "neither this . . . nor that." The poetic force of metaphor is often the trace of this rejected alternative, this wounding of language. Through it, in its opening, experience itself is silently revealed.

Without intermediary and without communion, absolute proximity and absolute distance: "eros in which, within the proximity to the other, distance is integrally maintained; eros whose pathos is made simultaneously of this proximity and this duality." A community of nonpresence, and therefore of non-phenomenality. Not a community without light, not a blindfolded synagogue, but a community anterior to Platonic light. A light before neutral light, before the truth which arrives as a third party, the truth "which we look toward together," the judgmental arbitrator's truth. Only the other, the totally other, can be manifested as what it is before the shared truth, within a certain nonmanifestation and a certain absence. It can be said only of the other that its phenomenon is a certain nonphenomenon, its presence (*is*) a certain absence. Not pure and simple absence, for there logic could make its claim, but a *certain* absence. Such a formulation shows clearly that within this experience of the other the logic of noncontradiction, that is, everything which Levinas designates as "formal logic," is contested in its root. This root would be not only the root of our language, but the root of all of western philosophy,²⁰ particularly phenomenology and ontology. This naïveté would prevent them from thinking the other (that is from thinking; and this would indeed be the reason why, although Levinas, "the enemy of thought," does not say so), and from aligning their discourse with the other. The consequence would be double. (a) Because they do not think the other, they do not have time. Without time, they do not have history. The absolute alterity of each instant, without which there would be no time, cannot be produced—constituted—within the identity of the subject or the existent. It comes into time through the Other. Bergson and Heidegger would have overlooked this (*De l'existence à l'existent* [hereafter *EE*]), and Husserl even more so. (b) More seriously, to renounce the other (not by being weaned from it, but by detaching oneself from it, which is actually to be in relation to it, to respect it while nevertheless overlooking it, that is, while knowing it, identifying it, assimilating it), to renounce the other is to enclose oneself within solitude (the bad solitude of solidity and self-identity) and to repress ethical transcendence. In effect, if the Parmenidean tradition—we know now what this means for Levinas—disregards the irreducible solitude of the "existent," by the same token it disregards the relationship to the other. It does not think solitude, it does not appear to itself to be solitude, because it is the solitude of totality and opacity. "Solipsism is neither observation nor sophism; it is the very structure of reason." Therefore, there is a soliloquy of reason and a solitude of light. Incapable of respecting the Being and meaning of the other, phenomenology and ontology would be philosophies of violence. Through them, the entire philosophical tradition, in

its meaning and at bottom, would make common cause with oppression and with the totalitarianism of the same. The ancient clandestine friendship between light and power, the ancient complicity between theoretical objectivity and technico-political possession.²¹ "If the other could be possessed, seized, and known, it would not be the other. To possess, to know, to grasp are all synonyms of power" (*TA*). To see and to know, to have and to will, unfold only within the oppressive and luminous identity of the same; and they remain, for Levinas, fundamental categories of phenomenology and ontology. Everything given to me within light appears as given to myself by myself. Henceforward, the heliological *metaphor* only turns away our glance, providing an alibi for the historical violence of light: a displacement of technico-political oppression in the direction of philosophical discourse. For it has always been believed that metaphors exculpate, lift the weight of things and of acts. If there is no history, except through language, and if language (except when it names Being *itself* or nothing: almost never) is elementally metaphorical, Borges is correct: "Perhaps universal history is but the history of several metaphors." Light is only one example of these "several" fundamental "metaphors," but what an example! Who will ever dominate it, who will ever pronounce its meaning without first being pronounced by it? What language will ever escape it? How, for example, will the metaphysics of the face as the *epiphany* of the other free itself of light? Light perhaps has no opposite; if it does, it is certainly not night. If all languages combat within it, *modifying only* the same metaphor and choosing the *best* light, Borges, several pages later, is correct again: "Perhaps universal history is but the history of the diverse *intonations* of several metaphors" (*La sphère de Pascal*; my italics).

II Phenomenology, ontology, metaphysics

These measures were critical, but they obeyed the voice of full certainty. They appeared, through the essays, the concrete and subtle analyses concerning exoticism, the caress, insomnia, fecundity, work, the instant, fatigue, only at the point, at the edge of the indescribable indestructible which opens up classical conceptuality, seeking its own conceptuality between rejections. *Totality and Infinity*, the great work, not only enriches these concrete analyses but organizes them within a powerful architecture. Levinas calls the positive movement which takes itself beyond the disdain or disregard of the other, that is, beyond the appreciation or possession, understanding and knowledge of the other, *metaphysics* or *ethics*. Metaphysical transcendence is *desire*.

This concept of desire is as anti-Hegelian as it can possibly be. It does not designate a movement of negation and assimilation, the negation of alterity first necessary in order to become "self-consciousness" "certain of itself" (*Phenomenology of the Mind* and *Encyclopedica*). For Levinas, on the

contrary, desire is the respect and knowledge of the other as other, the ethico-metaphysical moment whose transgression consciousness *must* forbid itself. According to Hegel, on the contrary, this gesture of transgression and assimilation is necessary and essential. Levinas sees in it a premetaphysical, natural necessity, and in several splendid analyses separates desire from enjoyment—which Hegel does not appear to do. Enjoyment is only deferred in work:²² thus, Hegelian desire would be only need, in Levinas's sense. But one rightly suspects that things would appear more complicated, if one followed closely the movement of certitude and the truth of desire in the *Phenomenology of the Mind*. Despite his anti-Kierkegaardian protests, Levinas here returns to the themes of *Fear and Trembling*: the movement of desire can be what it is only paradoxically, as the renunciation of desire.

Neither theoretical intentionality nor the affectivity of need exhaust the movement of desire: they have as their meaning and end their own accomplishment, their own fulfillment and satisfaction within the totality and identity of the same. Desire, on the contrary, permits itself to be appealed to by the absolutely irreducible exteriority of the other to which it must remain infinitely inadequate. Desire is equal only to excess. No totality will ever encompass it. Thus, the metaphysics of desire is a metaphysics of infinite separation. Not a consciousness of separation as a Judaic consciousness, as an unhappy consciousness:²³ in the Hegelian Odyssey Abraham's unhappiness is an expediency, the provisional necessity of a figure and a transition within the horizons of a reconciliatory return to self and absolute knowledge. Here there is no return. For desire is not unhappy. It is opening and freedom. Further, a desired infinite may govern desire itself, but it can never appease desire by its presence. "And if desire were to cease with God/Ah, I would envy you hell." (May we cite Claudel to comment upon Levinas, when the latter also polemizes against "this spirit admired since [our] earliest youth"?)

The infinitely other is the invisible, since vision opens up only the illusory and relative exteriority of theory and of need. A provisional exteriority, given only within *sight of* its own consummation, its own consumption. Inaccessible, the invisible is the most high. This expression—perhaps inhabited by the Platonic resonances Levinas evokes, but more so by others more readily recognizable—tears apart, by the superlative excess, the spatial literality of the metaphor. No matter how high it is, height is always accessible; the most high, however, is higher than height. No addition of more height will ever measure it. It does not belong to space, is not of this world. But what necessity compels this inscription of language in space at the very moment when it exceeds space? And if the pole of metaphysical transcendence is a spatial non-height, what, in the last analysis, legitimates the expression of trans-ascendence, borrowed from Jean Wahl? The theme of the face perhaps will help us understand it.

The ego is the same. The alterity or negativity interior to the ego, the interior difference, is but an appearance: an *illusion*, a "play of the Same,"

the "mode of identification" of an ego whose essential moments are called body, possession, home, economy, etc. Levinas devotes some splendid descriptions to them. But this play of the same is not monotonous, is not repeated as monologue and formal tautology. As the work of identification and the concrete production of egoity, it entails a *certain* negativity. A finite negativity, an internal and relative modification through which the ego affects itself by itself, within its own movement of identification. Thus it alters itself toward itself within itself. The resistance to work, by provoking it, remains a moment of the same, a finite moment that forms a system and a totality with the agent. It necessarily follows, then, that Levinas will describe *history* as a blinding to the other, and as the laborious procession of the same. One may wonder whether history can be history, *if there is history*, when negativity is enclosed within the circle of the same, and when work does not truly meet alterity, providing itself with its own resistance. One wonders whether history itself does not begin with this relationship to the other which Levinas places beyond history. The framework of this question should govern the entire reading of *Totality and Infinity*. In any event, one observes the displacement of the concept of historicity of which we spoke above. It must be acknowledged that without this displacement no anti-Hegelianism could be logically consequent. The *necessary* condition for this anti-Hegelianism is therefore fulfilled.

A precaution must be made: the theme of the concrete (nonformal) tautology or of false (finite) heterology—this very difficult theme is proposed rather discreetly at the beginning of *Totality and Infinity*, but it conditions every affirmation made in the book. If negativity (work, history, etc.) never has a relation to the other, if the other is not the simple negation of the same, then neither separation nor metaphysical transcendence can be conceived under the category of negativity. Just as—as we saw above—simple internal consciousness could not provide itself with time and with the absolute alterity of every instant without the irruption of the totally-other, so the ego cannot engender alterity within itself without encountering the Other.

If one is not convinced by these initial propositions authorizing the equation of the ego and the same, one never will be. If one does not follow Levinas when he affirms that the things offered to work or to desire—in the Hegelian sense: for example, natural objectivity—belong to the ego, to the ego's economy (to the same), and do not offer the absolute resistance reserved for the other (Others); if one is tempted to think that this last resistance supposes, in its innermost meaning, the possibility of the resistance of things—the existence of the world which is not myself and in which I am, in as original a way as one may wish, for example as origin of the world within the world, although it is not to be confused with this possibility; if one does not follow Levinas when he affirms that the true resistance to the same is not that of things, is not *real* but rather *intelligible*,²⁴ and if one rebels against the notion of a purely intelligible resistance, then in all these

cases one will follow Levinas no further. Nor will one be able to follow, without an indefinable malaise, the conceptual operations liberated by the classical dissymmetry of the same and other, as they are overturned; or (as a classical mind would say), while they *feign* permitting themselves to be overturned, all the while remaining the *same*, impassive beneath an algebraic substitution.

What, then, is this encounter with the absolutely-other? Neither representation, nor limitation, nor conceptual relation to the same. The ego and the other do not permit themselves to be dominated or made into totalities by a concept of relationship. And first of all because the concept (material of language), which is always *given to the other*, cannot encompass the other, cannot include the other. The dative or vocative dimension which opens the original direction of language, cannot lend itself to inclusion in and modification by the accusative or attributive dimension of the object without violence. Language, therefore, cannot make its own possibility a totality and *include* within itself its own origin or its own end.

Truthfully, one does not have to wonder *what* this encounter is. It is *the* encounter, the only way out, the only adventuring outside oneself toward the unforeseeably-other. *Without hope of return*. In every sense of this expression, which is why this eschatology which awaits *nothing* sometimes appears infinitely hopeless. Truthfully, in *La trace de l'autre* eschatology does not only "appear" hopeless. It is given as such, and renunciation belongs to its essential meaning. In describing liturgy, desire, and the work of art as ruptures of the Economy and the Odyssey, as the impossibility of return to the same, Levinas speaks of an "eschatology without hope for the self or without liberation in my time."

Therefore, there is no way to conceptualize the encounter: it is made possible by the other, the unforeseeable "resistant to all categories." Concepts suppose an anticipation, a horizon within which alterity is amortized as soon as it is announced precisely because it has let itself be foreseen. The infinitely-other cannot be bound by a concept, cannot be thought on the basis of a horizon; for a horizon is always a horizon of the same, the elementary unity within which eruptions and surprises are always welcomed by understanding and recognized. Thus we are obliged to think in opposition to the truisms which we believed—which we still cannot not believe—to be the very ether of our thought and language. To attempt to think the opposite is stifling. And it is a question not only of thinking the opposite which is still in complicity with the classical alternatives, but of liberating thought and its language for the encounter occurring beyond these alternatives. Doubtless this encounter, which for the first time does not take the form of an intuitive contact (in ethics, in the sense given to it by Levinas, the principal, central prohibition is that of contact) but the form of a separation (encounter as separation, another rupture of "formal logic").²⁵ Doubtless this encounter of the unforeseeable *itself* is the only possible

opening of time, the only pure future, the only pure expenditure *beyond* history as economy. But this future, this beyond, is not another time, a day after history. It is *present* at the heart of experience. Present not as a total presence but as a *trace*. Therefore, before all dogmas, all conversions, all articles of faith or philosophy, experience itself is eschatological at its origin and in each of its aspects.

Face to face with the other within a glance *and* a speech which both maintain distance and interrupt all totalities, this being-together as separation precedes or exceeds society, collectivity, community. Levinas calls it *religion*. It opens ethics. The ethical relation is a religious relation (*Difficile liberté* [hereafter *DL*]). Not *a* religion, but *the* religion, the religiosity of the religious. This transcendence beyond negativity is not accomplished by an intuition of a positive presence; it "only institutes language at the point where neither no nor yes is the first word" (*TI*) but an interrogation. Not a theoretical interrogation, however, but a total question, a distress and denuding, a supplication, a demanding prayer addressed to a freedom, that is, to a commandment: the only possible ethical imperative, the only incarnated nonviolence in that it is respect for the other. An immediate respect for the other himself—one might say, although without following any literal indication by Levinas—because it does not pass through the neutral element of the universal, and through respect—in the Kantian sense²⁶—for the law.

This restitution of metaphysics then permits the radicalization and systematization of the previous reductions of phenomenology and ontology. The act of *seeing* is at the outset a respectful knowledge, and light passes for the medium which—as faithfully and neutrally as possible, as a third party—permits the known to be. It is not by chance that the theoretical relation has been the preferred framework of the metaphysical relation (cf. *TI*). When the third term, in its most neutral indetermination, is the light of Being—which is neither a being nor a non-being, while the same and the other *are*—the theoretical relation is ontology. According to Levinas, the latter always brings the other back into the midst of the same and does so for the benefit of the unity of Being. And the theoretical freedom which accedes to the thought of Being is but the identification of the same, the light in which I provide myself with what I claim to encounter, that is, an *economic* freedom, in the particular sense Levinas gives to this word. A freedom in immanence, a premetaphysical, one could almost say a physical, freedom, an empirical freedom, even if it is called reason within history. Reason would be nature. Metaphysics begins when theory criticizes itself as ontology, as the dogmatism and spontaneity of the same, and when metaphysics, in departing from itself, lets itself be put into question by the other in the movement of ethics. Although in fact it is secondary, metaphysics as the critique of ontology is rightfully and philosophically primary. If it is true that "Western philosophy most often has been an ontology" dominated since Socrates by a Reason which receives only what it gives itself,²⁷ a Reason

which does nothing but recall itself to itself, and if ontology is tautology and egology, then it has always *neutralized* the other, in every sense of the word. Phenomenological neutralization, one might be tempted to say, gives the most subtle and modern form to this historical, political and authoritarian neutralization. Only metaphysics can free the other from the light of Being or from the phenomenon which "takes away from Being its resistance."

Heideggerean "ontology," despite its seductive appearance, would not escape this framework. It would still remain "egology" and even "egoism": "*Sein und Zeit* has argued perhaps but one sole thesis: Being is inseparable from the comprehension of Being (which unfolds as time); Being is already an appeal to subjectivity. The primacy of ontology for Heidegger does not rest on the truism: 'to know the *existent* it is necessary to have comprehended the Being of the existent.' To affirm the priority of *Being* over the *existent* is, indeed, to decide the essence of philosophy; it is to subordinate the relation with *someone*, who is an existent (the ethical relation), to a relation with the *Being of the existent*, which, impersonal, permits the apprehension, the domination of the existent (a relationship of knowing), subordinates justice to freedom . . . the mode of remaining the same in the midst of the other" (*TI*, p. 45). Despite all the misunderstandings which may be embedded in this treatment of Heideggerean thought—we will study them for themselves later—Levinas's intention, in any event, seems clear. The neutral thought of Being neutralizes the Other as a being: "Ontology as first philosophy is a philosophy of power" (*TI*, p. 46), a philosophy of the neutral, the tyranny of the state as an anonymous and inhuman universality. Here we find the premises for a critique of the state's alienation whose anti-Hegelianism would be neither subjectivist, nor Marxist; nor anarchist, for it is a philosophy of the "principle, which can be only as a commandment." The Heideggerean "possibilities" remain powers. Although they are pretechnical and preobjective, they are nonetheless oppressive and possessive. By another paradox, the philosophy of the neutral communicates with a philosophy of the site, of rootedness, of pagan violence, of ravishment, of enthusiasm, a philosophy offered up to the sacred, that is, to the anonymous divinity, the divinity without the Deity (*DL*). It is a "shameful materialism" in that it is complete, for at heart materialism is not primarily sensualism, but a recognized primacy of the neutral (*TI*). The notion of *primacy*, employed so frequently by Levinas, well translates the gesture of his entire critique. According to the indication present in the notion of *archia*, the philosophical beginning is immediately transposed into an ethical or philosophical command. From the very first, *primacy* indicates principle and chief. All the classical concepts interrogated by Levinas are thus dragged toward the *agora*, summoned to justify themselves in an ethico-political language that they have not always sought—or believed that they sought—to speak, summoned to transpose themselves into this language by confessing their violent aims. Yet they already spoke this language in the city, and

spoke it well, by means of the detours of philosophy and despite philosophy's apparent disinterest, notwithstanding its eventual return to power. Here we find the premises for a non-Marxist reading of philosophy as ideology. The ways chosen by Levinas are decidedly difficult: rejecting idealism and the philosophies of subjectivity, he must also denounce the neutrality of a "Logos which is the verb of no one" (*TI*). (It could no doubt be demonstrated that Levinas, uncomfortably situated in the difference between Husserl and Heidegger—and, indeed, by virtue of the history of his thought—always criticizes the one in a style and according to a scheme borrowed from the other, and finishes by sending them off into the wings together as partners in the "play of the same" and as accomplices in the same historico-philosophical coup.) The verb must not only be the verb of someone—it must overflow, in its movement toward the other, what is called the speaking subject. Neither the philosophies of the neutral nor the philosophies of subjectivity can acknowledge this trajectory of speech that no speech can make into a totality. By definition, if the other is the other, and if all speech is for the other, no logos as absolute knowledge can *comprehend* dialogue and the trajectory toward the other. This incomprehensibility, this rupture of logos is not the beginning of irrationalism but the wound or inspiration which opens speech and then makes possible every logos or every rationalism. A total logos still, in order to be logos, would have to let itself be proffered toward the other beyond its own totality. If, for example, there is an ontology or a logos of the comprehension of the Being (of beings), it is in that "already the comprehension of Being is said to the existent, who again arises behind the theme in which he is presented. This 'saying to the other'—this relationship to the other as interlocutor, this relation with an *existent*—precedes all ontology; it is the ultimate relation in Being. Ontology presupposes metaphysics" (*TI*, pp. 47–48). "Prior to the unveiling of Being in general, as the basis of knowledge and meaning of Being, there is a relationship with the existent which is expressed; before the ontological level, the ethical level." Ethics is therefore metaphysics. "Morality is not a branch of philosophy, but first philosophy."

The absolute overflowing of ontology—as the totality and unity of the same: Being—by the other occurs as infinity because no totality can constrain it. The infinity irreducible to the *representation* of infinity, the infinity exceeding the ideation in which it is thought, thought of as more than I can think, as that which cannot be an object or a simple "objective reality" of the idea—such is the pole of metaphysical transcendence. After the *epekeina tes ousias*, the Cartesian idea of infinity made metaphysics emerge for a second time in Western ontology. But what neither Plato nor Descartes recognized (along with several others, if we may be permitted not to believe to the same extent as Levinas in their solitude among the philosophical crowd which understands neither true transcendence nor the strange idea of Infinity) is that the expression of this infinity is the *face*.

The face is not only a visage which may be the surface of things or animal facies, aspect, or species. It is not only, following the origin of the word, what is *seen*, seen because it is naked. It is also that which sees. Not so much that which sees things—a theoretical relation—but that which exchanges its glance. The visage is a face only in the face-to-face. As Scheler said (but our citation must not make us forget that Levinas is nothing less than Schelerian): “I see not only the eyes of an other, I see also that he looks at me.”

Did not Hegel say this too? “If we ask ourselves now in which particular organ the soul appears as such in its entirety we shall at once point to the eye. For in the eye the soul concentrates itself; it not merely uses the eye as its instrument, but is itself therein manifest. We have, however, already stated, when referring to the external covering of the human body, that in contrast with the bodies of animals, the heart of life pulses through and throughout it. And in much the same sense it can be asserted of art that it has to invent every point of the external appearance into the direct testimony of the human eye, which is the source of soul-life, and reveals spirit.”²⁸ This is perhaps the occasion to emphasize, concerning a precise point, a theme that we will enlarge upon later: Levinas is very close to Hegel, much closer than he admits, and at the very moment when he is apparently opposed to Hegel in the most radical fashion. This is a situation he must share with all anti-Hegelian thinkers, and whose final significance calls for much thought. Here, in particular, on the relations between desire and the eye, between sound and theory, the convergence is as profound as the difference, being neither simply added to nor juxtaposed with it. In effect, like Levinas Hegel thought that the eye, not aiming at “consumption,” suspends desire. It is the very limit of desire (and perhaps, thereby, its resource) and is the first theoretical sense. We must not conceive light and the eye’s opening on the basis of any physiology, but on the basis of the relation between death and desire. After having spoken of taste, touch, and smell, Hegel again writes, in the *Aesthetics*: “*Sight*, on the other hand, possesses a purely ideal relation to objects by means of light, a material which is at the same time immaterial, and which suffers on its part the objects to continue in their free self-subsistence, making them appear and reappear, but which does not, as the atmosphere or fire does, consume them actively either by imperceptible degrees or patently. Everything then, is an object of the appetiteless vision, [la vue exempte de désirs] which, however, in so far as it remains unimpaired in its integrity, merely is disclosed in its form and colour.”²⁹

This neutralization of desire is what makes sight excellent for Hegel. But for Levinas, this neutralization is also, and for the same reasons, the first violence, even though the face is not what it is when the glance is absent. Violence, then, would be the solitude of a mute glance, of a face without speech, the abstraction of seeing. According to Levinas the glance *by itself*, contrary to what one may be led to believe, does not *respect* the other. Respect, beyond grasp and contact, beyond touch, smell and taste, can be

only as desire, and metaphysical desire does not seek to consume, as do Hegelian desire or need. This is why Levinas places sound above light. ("Thought is language and is thought in an element analogous to sound and not to light." What does this *analogy* mean here, a difference and a resemblance, a relation between the sensible sound and the sound of thought as intelligible speech, between sensibility and signification, the senses and sense? This is a question also posed by Hegel, admiring the word *Sinn*.)

In *Totality and Infinity* the movement of metaphysics is thus also the transcendence of hearing in relation to seeing. But in Hegel's *Aesthetics* too: "The remaining ideal sense is hearing. This is in signal contrast to the one just described. Hearing is concerned with the tone, rather than the form and colour of an object, with the vibration of what is corporeal; it requires no process of dissolution, as the sense of smell requires, but merely a trembling of the object, by which the same is in no wise impoverished. This ideal motion, in which through its sound what is as it were the simple individuality [*subjectivité*] the soul of the material thing expresses itself, the ear receives also in an ideal way, just as the eye shape and colour, and suffers thereby what is ideal or not external in the object to appeal to what is spiritual or non-corporeal."³⁰ But:

Hearing, which, as also the sight, does not belong to the senses of action [*sens pratiques*] but those of contemplation [*sens théoriques*]; and is, in fact, still more ideal than sight. For the unruffled, aesthetic observation of works of art no doubt permits the objects to stand out quietly in their freedom just as they are without any desire to impair that effect in any way; but that which it apprehends is not that which is itself essentially ideally composed, but rather on the contrary, that which receives its consistency in its sensuous existence. The ear, on the contrary, receives the result of that ideal vibration of material substance, without placing itself in a practical relation towards the objects, a result by means of which it is no longer the material object in its repose, but the first example of the more ideal activity of the soul itself which is apprehended.³¹

The question of the analogy would thus lead us back to the notion of *trembling*, which seems to us decisive in Hegel's *Aesthetics* in that it opens the passage to ideality. Further, in order to confront systematically Hegel's and Levinas's thoughts on the theme of the face, one would have to consult not only the pages of the *Phenomenology of the Mind* devoted to physiognomy, but also paragraph 411 of the *Encyclopedia* on mind, face, and language.

For reasons now familiar to us, the face-to-face eludes every category. For within it the face is given simultaneously as expression and as speech. Not only as glance, but as the original unity of glance and speech, eyes and

mouth, that speaks, but also pronounces its hunger. Thus it is also that which *hears* the invisible, for "thought is language," and "is thought in an element analogous to sound and not to light." This unity of the face precedes, in its signification, the dispersion of senses and organs of sensibility. Its signification is therefore irreducible. Moreover, the face does not *signify*. It does not incarnate, envelop, or signal anything other than self, soul, subjectivity, etc. Thought is speech, and is therefore immediately face. In this, the thematic of the face belongs to the most modern philosophy of language and of the body itself. The other is not signaled by his face, he is this face: "Absolutely present, in his face, the Other—without any metaphor—faces me."³² The other, therefore, is given "in person" and without allegory only in the face. Let us recall what Feuerbach, who also made the themes of height, substance, and face communicate with each other, said on this subject: "That which is situated highest in space is also in its quality the highest part of man, that which is closest to him, that which one can no longer separate from him—and this is his *head*. If I see a man's head, it is the man himself who I see; but if I only see his torso, I see no more than his torso."³³ *That which can no longer be separated from . . .* is substance in its essential predicates and "in itself." Levinas also often says *kath'auto* and "substance" in speaking of the other as face. The face is presence, *ousia*.

The face is not a metaphor, not a figure. The discourse on the face is neither allegory nor, as one might be tempted to believe, prosopopoeia. Consequently the height of the face (in relation to the rest of the body) perhaps determines *in part* (in part only, as we will see later) the expression *most-high* which we examined above. If the height of the most-high, as we might be tempted to say, *does not belong* to space (and this is why the superlative must destroy space as it constructs the metaphor), it is not because it is foreign to space, but because (within) space it is the origin of space, orienting space through speech and glance, through the face, the chief who commands body and space from above. (Aristotle, indeed, compares the transcendental principle of the good to the chief of the armies; however, he overlooks both the face, and the fact that the god of the armies is the Face.) The face does not signify, does not present itself as a sign, but *expresses itself*, offering itself *in person*, in itself, *kath'auto*: "the thing in itself expresses itself." To express oneself is to be *behind* the sign. To be behind the sign: is this not, *first of all*, to be capable of attending (to) one's speech, to assist it, according to the expression used in the *Phaedrus* as argument against Theuth (or Hermes)—an expression Levinas makes his own on several occasions. Only living speech, in its mastery and magisteriality, is able to assist itself; and only living speech is expression and not a servile sign—on the condition that it is truly speech, "the creative voice, and not the accomplice voice which is a servant" (E. Jabès). And we know that all the gods of writing (Greece, Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia) have the status of auxiliary gods, servile secretaries of the great god, lunar and clever couriers

who occasionally dethrone the king of the gods by dishonorable means. The written and the work are not expressions but signs for Levinas.

Along with the reference to the *epekeina tes ousias*, this is at very least the second Platonic theme of *Totality and Infinity*. It is also to be found in Nicholas of Cusa. "While the worker abandons his work, which then pursues its independent destiny, the verb of the professor is inseparable from the very person who proffers it."³⁴ The critique of the work thus implied separates Hegel from Nicholas of Cusa for one time at least.

This problematic requires separate consideration in and of itself. Is "oral discourse" "the plenitude of discourse?" Or, is it, in another sense, the "speech activity" in which I "am absent, missing from my products" which then betray me more than they express me? Is the "frankness" of expression essentially an aspect of living speech for him who is not God? This question is meaningless for Levinas, who conceives the face in terms of the "resemblance" of man and God. Are not weight and magisterial instruction an aspect of writing? Is it not possible to invert all of Levinas's statements on this point? By showing, for example, that writing can assist itself, for it *has time* and freedom, escaping better than speech from empirical urgencies. That, by neutralizing the demands of empirical "economy," writing's essence is more "metaphysical" (in Levinas's sense) than speech? That the writer absents himself better, that is, expresses himself better as other, addresses himself to the other more effectively than the man of speech? And that, in depriving himself of the *enjoyments* and effects of his signs, the writer more effectively renounces violence? It is true that he perhaps intends only to multiply his signs to infinity, thus forgetting—at very least—the other, the infinitely other as death, and thus practicing writing as *deferral* and as an *economy of death*. The limit between violence and nonviolence is perhaps not between speech and writing but within each of them. The thematic of the *trace* (which Levinas distinguishes from the effect, the path, or the sign which is not related to the other as the invisible absolute) should lead to a certain rehabilitation of writing. Is not the "He" whom transcendence and generous absence uniquely announce in the trace more readily the author of writing than of speech? The work, trans-economy, the pure expenditure as determined by Levinas, is neither play nor death. It is not simply to be confused with either the letter or with speech. It is not a sign, and therefore its concept cannot include the concept of the work found in *Totality and Infinity*. Levinas is thus at once quite close to and quite far from Nietzsche and Bataille.

Maurice Blanchot speaks of his disagreement with this preeminence of oral discourse, which resembles "the tranquil humanist and socratic speech which brings us close to the speaker."³⁵ Moreover, how could Hebraism belittle the letter, in praise of which Levinas writes so well? For example: "To admit the action of literature on men—this is perhaps the ultimate wisdom of the West, in which the people of the Bible will be recognized"

(*DL*); and "The spirit is free in the letter, and subjugated in the root"; and then, "To love the Torah more than God" is "protection against the madness of a direct contact with the Sacred" (*DL*). The aspect of living and original speech *itself* which Levinas seeks to save is clear. Without its possibility, outside its horizon, writing is nothing. In this sense, writing will always be secondary. To liberate it from this possibility and this horizon, from this essential secondariness, is to deny it as writing, and to leave room for a grammar or a lexicon without language, for cybernetics or electronics. But it is only in God that speech, as presence, as the origin and horizon of writing, is realized without defect. One would have to be able to show that only this reference to the speech of God distinguishes Levinas's intentions from those of Socrates in the *Phaedrus*; and that for a thought of original finitude this distinction is no longer possible. And that if writing is secondary at this point, nothing, however, has occurred before it.

As for Levinas's ties to Blanchot, it seems to us that despite the frequent rapprochements he proposes, the profound and incontestable affinities between them all belong to the critical and negative moment, within the hollow space of finitude in which messianic eschatology comes to resonate, within the expectation of expectation in which Levinas has begun to hear a response. This response is still called expectation, of course, but Levinas no longer has to await it. The affinity ceases, it seems to us, at the moment when eschatological positivity retrospectively comes to illuminate the common route, to lift the finitude and pure negativity of the question, when the neutral is determined. Blanchot could probably extend over all of Levinas's propositions what he says about the dissymetry within the space of communication: "Here, I believe, is what is decisive in the affirmation which we must hear, and which must be maintained independently of the theological context in which it occurs." But is this possible? Independent of its "theological context" (an expression that Levinas would most likely reject) does not this entire discourse collapse?

To be behind the sign which is in the world is *afterward* to remain invisible to the world within epiphany. In the face, the other is given over in person *as other*, that is, as that which does not reveal itself, as that which cannot be made thematic. I could not possibly speak of the Other, make of the Other a theme, pronounce the Other as object, in the accusative. I can only, I *must* only speak to the other; that is, I must call him in the vocative, which is not a category, a *case* of speech, but, rather the bursting forth, the very raising up of speech. Categories must be missing for the Other not to be overlooked; but for the Other not to be overlooked, He must present himself as absence, and must appear as nonphenomenal. Always behind its signs and its works, always within its secret interior, and forever discreet, interrupting all historical totalities through its freedom of speech, the face is not "of this world." It is the origin of the world. I can speak *of it* only by speaking *to it*; and I *may* reach it only as I *must* reach it. But I must only

reach it as the inaccessible, the invisible, the intangible. Secret, separate, invisible like Gyjès ("the very condition of man")—this is the very state, the very status of what is called the *psyche*. This absolute separation, this natural atheism, this lying freedom in which truth and discourse take root—all this is a "great glory for the creator." An affirmation which, for once at least, is hardly disorienting.

For the face to present the other without metaphor, speech must not only translate thought. Thought, of course, already must be speech, but above all the body must also remain a language. Rational knowledge must not be the first word of words. If one is to believe Levinas, Husserl and Heidegger, at bottom, accepted the classical subordination of language to thought, and body to language. On the contrary, Merleau-Ponty, "better than others," would have shown "that disincarnated thought, thinking of speech before speaking it, thought as constitutive of the world of speech, was a myth." But by the force of a movement proper to Levinas, he accepts this extreme "modern" audacity only to redirect it toward an infinitism that this audacity itself must suppose, according to himself; and the form of this infinitism is often quite classical, pre-Kantian rather than Hegelian. Thus, the themes of one's own body as language and as intentionality cannot get around the classical dangers, and thought cannot *first* be language unless it is acknowledged that thought is *first* and irreducibly a relation to the other (which it seems to us did not escape Merleau-Ponty);³⁶ but a relation to an irreducible other who summons me without possibility of return from without, for in this order is presented the infinity which no thought can enclose and which forbids all monologue "even if it had 'the corporal intentionality' of Merleau-Ponty." Despite all appearances and all habitual thinking, it must be acknowledged here that the dissociation of thought and language, and the subordination of the latter to the former, are proper to a philosophy of finitude. And this demonstration would refer us once more to the Cartesian Cogito of the third *Meditation*, beyond Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger, and Husserl. And does so according to a schema that seems to us to support the entirety of Levinas's thought: the other is the other only if his alterity is absolutely irreducible, that is, infinitely irreducible; and the infinitely Other can only be Infinity.

As speech and glance the face is not in the world, since it opens and exceeds the totality. This is why it marks the limit of all power, of all violence, and the origin of the ethical. In a sense, murder is always directed against the face, but thereby always misses it. "Murder exerts a power over that which escapes power. Still, a power, for the face expresses itself in the sensible; but already impotence, because the face rips apart the sensible." "The Other is the only being who I may wish to kill," but the only one, also, who orders that "thou shalt commit no murders," and thus absolutely limits my power. Not by opposing me with another force in the world, but by speaking to me, and by looking at me from an *other* origin of the world,

from that which no finite power can restrict: the strange, unthinkable notion of unreal resistance. Since his 1953 article (already cited), Levinas no longer, to our knowledge, speaks of "intelligible resistance"—an expression whose sense still belongs at least literally, to the realm of the same, and which was utilized, apparently, only to signify an unreal resistance. In *Totality and Infinity* Levinas speaks of "ethical resistance."

That which escapes the concept as power, therefore, is not existence in general, but the existence of the Other. And first of all because, despite all appearances, there is no concept of the Other. We would have to reflect upon this word "Other" [*Autrui*] in an artisan-like way, in the realm where philosophy and philology constrain each other, uniting their concerns and their rigor—this word "Other" circumscribed in silence by the capital letter which ever increases the neutrality of the *other*, and which we use so familiarly, even though it is the very disorder of our conceptuality. Is it only a common noun without concept? But, first of all, is it a noun? It is not an adjective, or a pronoun; therefore it is a substantive—and such it is classed by the dictionaries—but a substantive which is not, as usual, a species of noun: neither common noun, for it cannot take, as in the category of the other in general, the *heteron*, the definite article. Nor the plural. "In the chancellery location *l'autrui* [the Other], *le* must not be understood as the article of *autrui*: implied is *property, rights: the property, the rights of Others*," notes Littré, who began thus: "*Autrui*, from *alter-huic*, this other, in regimen: this is why *autrui* is always in regimen, and why *autrui* is less general than *les autres* [the others]." Thus, without making language the accident of thought, we would have to account for this: that, within language, that which is always "in regimen" and in the least generality is, in its meaning, undecidable and beyond genre. What is the origin of this *case* of meaning in language, of this *regimen* in which language places meaning? Nor is *autrui* a proper noun, even though its anonymity signifies but the unnamable source of every proper noun. We would have to examine patiently what emerges in language when the Greek conception of *heteron* seems to run out of breath when faced by the *alter-huic*; what happens when the *heteron* seems to become incapable of mastering what it alone, however, is able to precomprehend by concealing it as alterity (other in general), and which, in return, will reveal to *heteron* its irreducible center of meaning (the other as Other [*autrui*]). We would have to examine the complicity of the concealment and the precomprehension which does not occur within a conceptual movement, for the French word *autrui* does not designate a category of the genre *autre*. We would have to examine this thought of the other *in general* (which is not a genre), the Greek thought within which this nonspecific *difference* realizes (itself in) our history. Or, rather: what does *autre* mean before its Greek determination as *heteron*, and its Judeo-Christian determination as *autrui*? This is the kind of question which Levinas seems to contest profoundly: according to him, only the irruption of the

Other permits access to the absolute and to the irreducible alterity of the other. We would have to examine, therefore, this *Huic of autrui* whose transcendence is not yet that of a thou. Here, Levinas's opposition to Buber or to Gabriel Marcel becomes meaningful. After opposing the magisterial height of the *You* to the intimate reciprocity of the Me-Thou (*TI*), Levinas seems to move toward a philosophy of the *Ille*, of the *He (II)* in his meditation of the *Trace* (that is, of the neighbor as a distant stranger, according to the original ambiguity of the word translated as the "neighbor" to be loved). A philosophy of the *He* who would not be an impersonal object opposed to the *thou*, but the invisible transcendence of the Other.³⁷ If the face's expression is not revelation, then the unrevealable is expressed beyond all thematization, beyond all constitutive analysis, all phenomenology. At its various stages, the transcendental constitution of the *alter ego*—of which Husserl attempts to reassemble the description in the fifth of the *Cartesian Meditations*—would presuppose that whose genesis it allegedly traces (according to Levinas). The Other could not be constituted as an alter ego, as a phenomenon of the ego, by and for a nomadic subject proceeding by appresentative analogy. All the difficulties encountered by Husserl could be "surmounted" if the ethical relationship were recognized as the original face-to-face, as the emergence of absolute alterity, the emergence of an exteriority which can be neither derived, nor engendered, nor constituted on the basis of anything other than itself. An absolute outside, an exteriority infinitely overflowing the monad of the *ego cogito*. Here again, Descartes against Husserl, the Descartes of the *Third Meditation* allegedly misconstrued by Husserl. While Descartes, in his reflections on the *cogito*, becomes aware that infinity not only cannot be constituted as a (dubitable) object, but has already made infinity possible as a *cogito* overflowing the object (a nonspatial overflowing, against which metaphor shatters), Husserl, on the other hand, "sees in the cogito a subjectivity with no support from without, constituting the idea of infinity itself, and providing himself with it as object" (*TI*). Now, the infinite(-ly other) cannot be an object because it is speech, the origin of meaning and the world. Therefore, no phenomenology can account for ethics, speech, and justice.

But if all justice begins with speech, all speech is not just. Rhetoric may amount to the violence of theory, which *reduces* the other when it *leads* the other, whether through psychology, demagoguery, or even pedagogy which is not instruction. The latter descends from the heights of the master, whose absolute exteriority does not impair the disciple's freedom. Beyond rhetoric, speech uncovers the nudity of the face, without which no nudity would have any meaning. All nudity, "even the nudity of the body experienced in shame," is a "figure of speech" in relation to the nonmetaphorical nudity of the face. This is already quite explicit in *Is Ontology Fundamental?* "The nudity of the face is not a stylistic figure." And it is shown, still in the form of negative theology, that this nudity is not even an opening, for an opening is relative

to a "surrounding plenitude." The word "nudity" thus destroys itself after serving to indicate something beyond itself. An entire reading and interrogation of *Totality and Infinity* could be developed around this affirmation. For this affirmation seems to us quite implicitly—perhaps even too implicitly—to support the decisive division between what Levinas calls the face and that which is *Beyond the Face*, the section which considers, aside from the *Phenomenology of Eros*, Love, Fecundity, and Time. This nudity of the face, speech, and glance, being neither theory nor theorem, is offered and exposed as denuding, as demanding supplication, as the unthinkable unity of a speech able to assist itself and a glance which calls for assistance.

Asymmetry, non-light, and commandment then would be violence and injustice themselves—and, indeed, so they are commonly understood—if they established relations between finite beings, or if the other was but a negative determination of the (finite or infinite) same. But we have seen that this is not the case. Infinity (as infinitely other) cannot be violent as is totality (which is thus always *defined* by Levinas, always determined by an option, that is, an initial decision of his discourse, as *finite totality*: totality, for Levinas, means a finite totality. This functions as a silent axiom). This is why God alone keeps Levinas's world from being a world of the pure and worst violence, a world of immorality itself. The structures of living and naked experience described by Levinas are the very structures of a world in which war would rage—strange conditional—if the infinitely other were not infinity, if there were, by chance, one naked man, finite and alone. But in this case, Levinas would no doubt say, there no longer would be any war, for there would be neither face nor true asymmetry. Therefore the naked and living experience in which God has *already* begun to speak could no longer be our concern. In other words, in a world where the face would be fully respected (as that which is not of this world), there no longer would be war. In a world where the face no longer would be absolutely respected, where there no longer would be a face, there would be no more cause for war. God, therefore, is implicated in war. His name too, like the name of peace, is a function within the system of war, the only system whose basis permits us to speak, the only system whose language may ever be spoken. With or without God, there would be no war. War supposes and excludes God. We can have a relation to God only within such a system. Therefore war—for war there is—is the difference between the face and the finite world without a face. But is not this difference that which has always been called the world, in which the absence-presence of God *plays*? Only the play of the world permits us *to think the essence* of God. In a sense that our language—and Levinas's also—accommodates poorly the play of the world precedes God.

The face-to-face, then, is not originally determined by Levinas as the vis-à-vis of two equal and upright men. The latter supposes the face-to-face of the man with bent neck and eyes raised toward the God on high. Language is indeed the possibility of the face-to-face and of being-upright, but it does

not exclude inferiority, the humility of the glance at the father as the glance of the child made in memory of having been expelled before knowing how to walk, and of having been delivered, prone and *infans*, into the hands of the adult masters. Man, one might say, is a God arrived too early, that is, a God who knows himself forever late in relation to the already-there of Being. But it is certain that these last remarks—and this is the least one might say—do not belong to the genre of commentary. And we are not referring, here, to the themes known under the name of psychoanalysis, nor to the embryological or anthropological hypothesis on the structurally premature birth of man's offspring. Let it suffice us to know that man is born.³⁸

God's name is often mentioned, but this return to experience, and to "things themselves," as a relation to the infinite(ly) other is not theological, even if it alone is capable, afterward, of founding theological discourse, which up to now has "imprudently considered the idea of the relationship between God and creation in ontological terms" (TI). The foundation of metaphysics—in Levinas's sense—is to be encountered in the return to things themselves, where we find the common root of humanism and theology: the resemblance between man and God, man's visage and the Face of God. "The Other resembles God" (*ibid.*). Via the passageway of this resemblance, man's speech can be lifted up toward God, an almost unheard of *analogy* which is the very movement of Levinas's discourse on discourse. Analogy as dialogue with God: "Discourse is discourse with God. . . . Metaphysics is the essence of this language with God." Discourse with God, and not in God as *participation*. Discourse with God, and not discourse on God and his attributes as *theology*. And the dissymetry of my relation to the other, this "curvature of inter-subjective space signifies the divine intention of all truth." It "is, perhaps, the very presence of God." Presence as separation, presence-absence—again the break with Parmenides, Spinoza and Hegel, which only "the idea of creation *ex nihilo*" can consummate. Presence as separation, presence-absence as resemblance, but a resemblance which is not the "ontological mark" of the worker imprinted on his product, or on "beings created in his image and resemblance" (Malebranche);³⁹ a resemblance which can be understood neither in terms of communion or knowledge, nor in terms of participation and incarnation. A resemblance which is neither a sign nor an effect of God. Neither the sign nor the effect exceeds the same. We are "in the Trace of God." A proposition which risks incompatibility with every allusion to the "very presence of God." A proposition readily converted into atheism: and if God was an *effect of the trace*? If the idea of divine presence (life, existence, parousia, etc.), if the name of God was but the movement of erasure of the trace in presence? Here it is a question of knowing whether the trace permits us to think presence in its system, or whether the reverse order is the true one. It is doubtless the *true order*. But it is indeed the *order of truth* which is in question. Levinas's thought is maintained between these two postulations.

The face of God disappears forever in showing itself. Thus are reassembled in the unity of their metaphysical signification, at the very heart of the experience denuded by Levinas, the diverse evocations of the Face of Yahweh, who of course is never named in *Totality and Infinity*. The face of Yahweh is the *total* person and the *total* presence of "the Eternal speaking face to face with Moses," but saying to him also: "Thou canst not see my face: for there shall be no man see me and live . . . thou shalt stand upon a rock: and it shall come to pass, while my glory passeth by, that I will put thee in a cleft of the rock, and will cover thee with my hand while I pass by: And I will take away mine hand, and thou shalt see my back parts: but my face shall not be seen" (Exodus 33:20–23). The face of God which commands while hiding itself is at once more and less a face than all faces. Whence, perhaps, despite all Levinas's precautions, the equivocal complicity of theology and metaphysics in *Totality and Infinity*. Would Levinas subscribe to this infinitely ambiguous sentence from the *Book of Questions* by Edmond Jabès: "All faces are His; this is why HE has no face"?

The face is neither the face of God nor the figure of man: it is their resemblance. A resemblance which, however, we must think before, or without, the assistance of the Same.⁴⁰

III Difference and eschatology

The questions whose principles we now will attempt to indicate are all, in several senses, questions of language: questions of language and the question of language. But if our commentary has not been too unfaithful, it is already clear that there is no element of Levinas's thought which is not, in and of itself, engaged by such questions.

Of the original polemic

First, let it be said, for our own reassurance: the route followed by Levinas's thought is such that all our questions already belong to his own interior dialogue, are displaced into his discourse and only listen to it, from many vantage points and in many ways.

A. Thus, for example, *De l'existence à l'existant* and *Le temps et l'autre* seemed to proscribe the "logic of genre," as well as the categories of the Same and Other. These lacked the originality of the experience to which Levinas wished to lead us back: "To the cosmos which is Plato's world is opposed the world of the mind, in which the implications of eros are not reduced to the logic of genre, in which the ego is substituted for the *same*, and Others for the *other*." Now, in *Totality and Infinity*, where the categories of Same and Other return in force, the *vis demonstrandi* and very energy of the break with tradition is precisely the adequation of Ego to the Same,

and of Others to the Other. Without using these terms themselves, Levinas often warned us against confusing *identity* and *ipseity*, Same and Ego: *idem* and *ipse*. This confusion, which, in a certain way, is immediately practiced by the Greek concept of *autos* and the German concept of *selbst*, does not occur as spontaneously in French; nevertheless, it returns as a kind of silent axiom in *Totality and Infinity*.⁴¹ We have seen this: according to Levinas there would be no interior difference, no fundamental and autochthonous alterity within the ego. If, formerly, interiority, the secret and original separation, had permitted the break with the classical use of the Greek concepts of Same and Other, the amalgamation of Same and Ego (Same and Ego homogenized, and homogenized with the concept, as well as with the finite totality) now permits Levinas to include within the same condemnation both the Greek and the most modern philosophies of subjectivity, the philosophies most careful to distinguish, as did Levinas previously, the Ego from the Same and Others from the other. Without close attention to this double movement, to this progress which seems to contest its own condition and its own initial stage, we would miss the originality of this protest against the concept, the state and totality: it is not made, as is generally the case, in the name of subjective existence, but against it. Simultaneously against Hegel and against Kierkegaard.

Levinas often warns us against confusing—as one is so tempted to do—his anti-Hegelianism with a subjectivism, or with a Kierkegaardian type of existentialism, both of which would remain, according to Levinas, violent and premetaphysical egoisms. “It is not I who do not accept the system, as Kierkegaard thought, it is the other.” Can one not wager that Kierkegaard would have been deaf to this distinction? And that he, in turn, would have protested against this conceptuality? It as subjective existence, he would have remarked perhaps, that the other does not accept the system. The other is not myself—and who has ever maintained that it is?—but it is *an Ego*, as Levinas must suppose in order to maintain his own discourse. The passage from Ego to other as *an Ego* is the passage to the essential, non-empirical *egoity* of subjective existence *in general*. The philosopher Kierkegaard does not *only* plead for Søren Kierkegaard, (“the egoistic cry of a subjectivity still concerned with Kierkegaard’s happiness or salvation”), but for subjective existence in general (a noncontradictory expression); this is why his discourse is philosophical, and not in the realm of empirical egoism. The name of a philosophical subject, when he says *I*, is always, in a certain way, a pseudonym. This is a truth that Kierkegaard adopted systematically, even while protesting against the “possibilization” of individual existence which resists the concept. And is not this essence of subjective existence presupposed by the respect for the other, which can be what it is—the other—only as subjective existence? In order to reject the Kierkegaardian notion of subjective existence Levinas should eliminate even the notions of an *essence* and a *truth* of subjective existence (of the

Ego, and primarily of the Ego of the Other). Moreover, this gesture would comply with the logic of the break with phenomenology and ontology. The least one might say is that Levinas does not do so, and cannot do so, without renouncing philosophical discourse. And, if you will, the attempt to achieve an opening toward the beyond of philosophical discourse, by means of philosophical discourse, which can never be shaken off completely, cannot possibly succeed *within language*—and Levinas recognizes that there is no thought before language and outside of it—except by *formally* and *thematically* posing the question of the relations between belonging and the opening, the question of closure. Formally—that is by posing it in the most effective and most formal, the most formalized, way possible: not in a *logic*, in other words in a philosophy, but in an inscribed description, in an inscription of the relations between the philosophical and the nonphilosophical, in a kind of unheard of *graphics*, within which philosophical conceptuality would be no more than a *function*.

Let us add, in order to do him *justice*, that Kierkegaard had a sense of the relationship to the irreducibility of the totally-other, not in the egoistic and esthetic here and now, but in the religious beyond of the concept, in the direction of a certain Abraham. And did he not, in turn—for we must let the other speak—see in Ethics, as a moment of Category and Law, the forgetting, in anonymity, of the subjectivity of religion? From his point of view, the ethical moment is Hegelianism itself, and he says so explicitly. Which does not prevent him from reaffirming ethics in repetition, and from reproaching Hegel for not having constituted a morality. It is true that Ethics, in Levinas's sense, is an Ethics without law and without concept, which maintains its non-violent purity only before being determined as concepts and laws. This is not an objection: let us not forget that Levinas does not seek to propose laws or moral rules, does not seek to determine a morality, but rather the essence of the ethical relation in general. But as this determination does not offer itself as a *theory* of Ethics, in question then, is an Ethics of Ethics. In this case, it is perhaps serious that this Ethics of Ethics can occasion neither a determined ethics nor determined laws without negating and forgetting itself. Moreover, is this Ethics of Ethics beyond all laws? Is it not the Law of laws? A coherence which breaks down the coherence of the discourse against coherence—the infinite concept, hidden within the protest against the concept.

If juxtaposition with Kierkegaard has often imposed itself upon us, despite the author's own admonitions, we are certain that as concerns the essential in its initial inspiration Levinas's protest against Hegelianism is foreign to Kierkegaard's protest. Inversely, a confrontation of Levinas's thought with Feuerbach's anti-Hegelianism would necessarily uncover, it seems to us, more profound convergences and affinities than the meditation of the Trace would confirm further still. We are speaking here of convergences, and not of influences; primarily because the latter is a notion whose philosophical

meaning is not clear to us; and next because, to our knowledge, Levinas nowhere alludes to Feuerbach or to Jaspers.

But why does Levinas return to categories he seemed to have rejected previously in attempting this very difficult passage beyond the debate—which is also a complicity—between Hegelianism and classical anti-Hegelianism?

We are not denouncing, here, an incoherence of language or a contradiction in the system. We are wondering about the meaning of a necessity: the necessity of lodging oneself within traditional conceptuality in order to destroy it. Why did this necessity finally impose itself upon Levinas? Is it an extrinsic necessity? Does it not touch upon only an instrument, only an “expression,” which can be put between quotation marks? Or does it hide, rather, some indestructible and unforeseeable resource of the Greek *logos*? Some unlimited power of envelopment, by which he who attempts to repel it would always already be *overtaken*?

B. During the same period, Levinas had expelled the concept of *exteriority*. The latter referred to an enlightened unity of space which neutralized radical alterity: the relation to the other, the relation of Instants to each other, the relation to Death, etc.—all of which are not relations of an Inside to an Outside. “The relation with the other is a relation with a Mystery. It is the other’s exteriority, or rather his alterity, for exteriority is a property of space, and brings the subject back to himself through the light which constitutes his entire being” (*TA*). Now *Totality and Infinity*, subtitled *Essay on Exteriority*, does not only abundantly employ the notion of exteriority. Levinas also intends to show that *true* exteriority is not spatial, for space is the Site of the Same. Which means that the Site is always a site of the Same. Why is it necessary still to use the word “exteriority” (which, if it has a meaning, if it is not an algebraic *X*, obstinately beckons toward space and light) in order to signify a nonspatial relationship? And if every “relationship” is spatial, why is it necessary still to designate as a (nonspatial) “relationship” the respect which absolves the other? Why is it necessary to *obliterate* this notion of exteriority without erasing it, without making it illegible, by stating that its truth is its untruth, that *true* exteriority is not spatial, that is, is not exteriority? That it is necessary to state infinity’s *excess* over totality in the language of totality; that it is necessary to state the other in the language of the Same; that it is necessary to think *true* exteriority as non-*exteriority*, that is, still by means of the Inside-Outside structure and by spatial metaphor; and that it is necessary still to inhabit the metaphor in ruins, to dress oneself in tradition’s shreds and the devil’s patches—all this means, perhaps, that there is no philosophical *logos* which must not *first* let itself be expatriated into the structure Inside-Outside. This deportation from its own site toward the Site, toward spatial locality is the *metaphor* congenital to the philosophical *logos*. Before being a rhetorical procedure within language, metaphor would be the emergence of language itself. And

philosophy is only this language; in the best of cases, and in an unaccustomed sense of the expression, philosophy can only *speak it*, state the metaphor *itself*, which amounts to *thinking* the metaphor within the silent horizon of the nonmetaphor: Being. Space being the wound and finitude of birth (of *the* birth) without which one could not even open language, one would not even have a true or false exteriority to speak of. Therefore, one can, by using them, *use up* tradition's words, rub them like a rusty and devalued old coin; one can say that true exteriority is nonexteriority without being interiority, and one can write by crossing out, by crossing out what already has been crossed out: for crossing out writes, still draws in space. The syntax of the Site whose archaic description is not legible *on* the metal of language cannot be erased: it is this metal itself, its too somber solidity and its too shining brilliance. Language, son of earth and sun: writing. One would attempt in vain, in order to wean language from exteriority and interiority, in order to wean language from weaning, to forget the words "inside," "outside," "exterior," "interior," etc., and to banish them by decree; for one would never come across a language without the rupture of space, an aerial or aquatic language in which, moreover, alterity would be lost more surely than ever. For the meanings which radiate from Inside-Outside, from Light-Night, etc., do not only inhabit the proscribed words; they are embedded, in person or vicariously, at the very heart of conceptuality itself. This is because they do not signify an immersion *in* space. The structure Inside-Outside or Day-Night has no meaning *in* a pure space given over to itself and disoriented. It emerges on the basis of an *included* origin, an *inscribed* eastern horizon which is neither within nor without space. This text of the glance is *also* the text of speech. Therefore it can be called Face. But one must not expect, henceforth, to separate language and space, to empty language of space, to snatch speech away from light, to speak while a Hand hides Glory. In vain would one exile any given word ("inside," "outside," "exterior," "interior," etc.), and in vain would one burn or imprison the letters of light, for language in its entirety already has awakened as a fall into light. That is, if you will, language arises with the sun. Even if "the sun is never named . . . its power is in our midst" (Saint-John Perse). To say that the infinite exteriority of the other *is not* spatial, is *non*-exteriority and *non*-interiority, to be unable to designate it otherwise than negatively—is this not to acknowledge that the infinite (also designated negatively in its current positivity: in-finite) cannot be stated? Does this not amount to acknowledging that the structure "inside-outside," which is language itself, marks the original finitude of speech and of whatever befalls it? No philosophical language will ever be able to reduce the naturalness of a spatial praxis in language; and one would have to meditate the unity of Leibniz's distinction between "civil language" and "scholarly" or philosophical language. And here one would have to meditate even more patiently the irreducible complicity, despite all of the philosopher's rhetorical efforts, between everyday language and

philosophical language; or, better, the complicity between certain historical languages and philosophical language. A certain ineradicable naturalness, a certain original naïveté of philosophical language could be verified for each speculative concept (except, of course, for the nonconcepts which are the name of *God* and the verb *to be*). Philosophical language belongs to a system of language(s). Thereby, its nonspeculative ancestry always brings a certain equivocality into speculation. Since this equivocality is original and irreducible, perhaps philosophy must adopt it, think it and be thought in it, must accommodate duplicity and difference within speculation, within the very purity of philosophical meaning. No one, it seems to us, has attempted this more profoundly than Hegel. Without naïvely using the category of chance, of happy predestination or of the chance encounter, one would have to do for each concept what Hegel does for the German notion of *Aufhebung*, whose equivocality and presence in the German language he calls *delightful*: “*Aufheben* has in the German language a double sense: that of preserving, maintaining, and that of leaving off, *bringing to an end*. To preserve, moreover, has a negative sense. . . . Lexicologically, these two determinations of the *Aufheben* may be considered as two meanings of the word. It is remarkable that a language comes to use one and the same word to express two opposed meanings. Speculative thought is *delighted* [*my italics*] to find in language words which by themselves have a speculative sense; the German language possesses several of these” (*Wissenschaft der Logik* I, pp. 124–25). In the *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte* (*Lectures on the Philosophy of History*) Hegel also notes that the union of two meanings (*historia rerum gestarum* and *res gestas*) of the word *Geschichte* “in our language” is not a “simple exterior contingency.”

Henceforth, if I cannot designate the (infinite) irreducible alterity of the Other except through the negation of (finite) spatial exteriority, perhaps the meaning of this alterity is finite, is not positively infinite. The infinitely other, the infinity of the other, is not the other as a positive infinity, as God, or as resemblance with God. The infinitely Other would not be what it is, other, if it was a positive infinity, and if it did not maintain within itself the negativity of the indefinite, of the *apeiron*. Does not “infinitely other” primarily signify that which does not come to an end, despite my interminable labor and experience? Can one respect the Other as Other, and expel negativity—labor—from transcendence, as Levinas seeks to do? The positive Infinity (God)—if these words are meaningful—cannot be infinitely Other. If one thinks, as Levinas does, that positive Infinity tolerates, or even requires, infinite alterity, then one must renounce all language, and first of all the words *infinite* and *other*. Infinity cannot be understood as Other except in the form of the in-finite. As soon as one attempts to think Infinity as a positive plenitude (one pole of Levinas’s nonnegative transcendence), the other becomes unthinkable, impossible, unutterable. Perhaps Levinas calls us toward this unthinkable-impossible-unutterable beyond (tradition’s)

Being and Logos. But it must not be possible either to think or state this call. In any event, that the positive plenitude of classical infinity is translated into language only by betraying itself in a negative word (in-finite), perhaps situates, in the most profound way, the point where thought breaks with language. A break which afterward will but resonate throughout all language. This is why the modern philosophies which no longer seek to distinguish between thought and language, nor to place them in a hierarchy, are essentially philosophies of original finitude. But then they should be able to abandon the word "finitude," forever prisoner of the classical framework. Is this possible? And what does it mean *to abandon* a classical notion?

The other cannot be what it is, infinitely other, except in finitude and mortality (mine *and* its). It is such as soon as it comes into language, of course, and only then, and only if the word *other* has a meaning—but has not Levinas taught us that there is no thought before language? This is why our questions certainly would be less bothersome for a classical infinitism of the Cartesian type, for example, which would dissociate thought and language, the latter never going as fast or as far as the former. Not only would these questions be less bothersome for a classical infinitism, but they could be its own questions. In another way: to neutralize space within the description of the other, in order thereby to liberate positive infinity—is this not to neutralize the essential finitude of a face (glance-speech) which *is a body*, and not, as Levinas continually insists, the corporeal metaphor of etherealized thought? Body: that is, *also* exteriority, locality in the fully spatial, literally spatial, meaning of the word; a zero point, the origin of space, certainly, but an origin which has no meaning before the *of*, an origin inseparable from genitivity and from the space that it engenders and orients: an *inscribed* origin. The *inscription* is the written origin: traced and henceforth *inscribed in* a system, in a figure which it no longer governs. Without which there no longer would be a body proper to oneself. If the face of the other was not *also, irreducibly*, spatial exteriority, we would still have to distinguish between soul and body, thought and speech; or better, between a true, nonspatial face, and its mask or metaphor, its spatial figure. The entire Metaphysics of the Face would collapse. Again, this question could be derived as much from a classical infinitism (duality of thought and language, but also of thought and body) as from the most modern philosophy of finitude. This strange alliance in the question perhaps signifies that within philosophy and within language, within *philosophical discourse* (supposing there are any others), one cannot simultaneously save the themes of positive infinity and of the face (the nonmetaphorical unity of body, glance, speech, and thought). This last unity, it seems to us, can be thought only within the horizon of infinite (indefinite) alterity as the irreducibly *common* horizon of Death and the Other. The horizon of finitude or the finitude of the horizon.

But, let us repeat, all this *within philosophical discourse*, where the thought of Death *itself* (without metaphor) and the thought of a positive Infinity

have never been able to understand each other. If the face *is body*, it is mortal. Infinite alterity as death cannot be reconciled with infinite alterity as positivity and presence (God). Metaphysical transcendence cannot be at once transcendence toward the other as Death and transcendence towards the other as God. Unless God means Death, which after all has never been *excluded* by the entirety of the classical philosophy within which we understand God both as Life and as the Truth of Infinity, of positive Presence. But what does this *exclusion* mean if not the exclusion of every particular *determination*? And that God is *nothing* (determined), is not life, because he is *everything*? and therefore is at once All and Nothing, Life and Death. Which means that God is or appears, *is named*, within the difference between All and Nothing, Life and Death. Within difference, and at bottom as Difference itself. This difference is what is called *History*. God is *inscribed* in it.

It will be said that Levinas stands opposed to precisely this kind of philosophical discourse. But in this combat, he already has given up the best weapon: disdain of discourse. In effect, when confronted by the classical difficulties of language we are referring to, Levinas cannot provide himself with the classical resources against them. At arms with the problems which were equally the problems of negative theology and of Bergsonism, he does not give himself the right to speak, as they did, in a language resigned to its own failure. Negative theology was spoken in a speech that knew itself failed and finite, inferior to logos as God's understanding. Above all, negative theology never undertook a Discourse with God in the face to face, and breath to breath, of two free speeches; and this despite the humility and the haughtiness of breaking off, or undertaking, the exchange. Analogously, Bergson had the right to announce the intuition of duration, and to denounce intellectual spatialization, within a language given over to space. It was not a question of saving, but of destroying discourse within "metaphysics," the science which allegedly does without symbols" (Bergson). Antagonistic metaphors were multiplied systematically in this autodestruction of language which advocated silent metaphysical intuition. Language being defined as a historical residue, there was no contradiction in utilizing it, for better or for worse, in order to denounce its own betrayal, and then to abandon it to its own insufficiency as rhetorical refuse, *speech lost to metaphysics*. Like negative theology, a philosophy of intuitive communion gave itself the right (correctly or incorrectly, another problem) to travel through philosophical discourse as through a foreign medium. But what happens when this right is no longer given, when the possibility of metaphysics is the possibility of speech? When metaphysical responsibility is responsibility for language, because "thought consists of speaking" (*TI*), and metaphysics is a language with God? How to think the other, if the other can be spoken only as exteriority and through exteriority, that is, nonalterity? And if the speech which must inaugurate and maintain absolute separation is by its essence rooted in space, which cannot conceive separation and absolute alterity?

If, as Levinas says, only discourse (and not intuitive contact) is righteous, and if, moreover, all discourse essentially retains within it space and the Same—does this not mean that discourse is originally violent? And that the philosophical logos, the only one in which peace may be declared, is inhabited by war? The distinction between discourse and violence⁴² always will be an inaccessible horizon. Nonviolence would be the telos, and not the essence of discourse. Perhaps it will be said that something like discourse has its essence in its telos, and the presence of its present in its future. This certainly is so, but on the condition that its future and its telos be nondiscourse: peace as a *certain* silence, a certain beyond of Speech, a certain possibility, a certain silent horizon of speech. And telos has always had the form of presence, be it a future presence. There is war only after the opening of discourse, and war dies out only at the end of discourse. Peace, like silence, is the strange vocation of a language called outside itself by itself. But since *finite* silence is also the medium of violence, language can only indefinitely tend toward justice by acknowledging and practicing the violence within it. Violence against violence. *Economy* of violence. An economy irreducible to what Levinas envisions in the word. If light is the element of violence, one must combat light with a certain other light, in order to avoid the worst violence, the violence of the night which precedes or represses discourse. This *vigilance* is a violence chosen as the least violence by a philosophy which takes history, that is, finitude, seriously; a philosophy aware of itself as *historical* in each of its aspects (in a sense which tolerates neither finite totality, nor positive infinity), and aware of itself, as Levinas says in another sense, as *economy*. But again, an economy which in being history, can be *at home* neither in the finite totality which Levinas calls the Same nor in the positive presence of the Infinite. Speech is doubtless the first defeat of violence, but paradoxically, violence did not exist before the possibility of speech. The philosopher (man) *must* speak and write within this war of light, a war in which he always already knows himself to be engaged; a war which he knows is inescapable, except by denying discourse, that is, by risking the worst violence. This is why this avowal of the war within discourse, an avowal which is not yet peace, signifies the opposite of bellicosity; the bellicosity—and who has shown this better than Hegel?—whose best accomplice *within history* is irenics. *Within history* which the philosopher cannot escape, because it is not history in the sense given to it by Levinas (totality), but is the history of the departures from totality, history as the very movement of transcendence, of the excess over the totality without which no totality would appear as such. History is not the totality transcended by eschatology, metaphysics, or speech. It is transcendence itself. If speech is a movement of metaphysical transcendence, it is history, and not beyond history. It is difficult to think the origin of history in a perfectly finite totality (the Same), as well as, moreover, in a perfectly positive infinity. If, in this sense, the movement of metaphysical transcendence is history, it is still violent, for

—and this is the legitimate truism from which Levinas always draws inspiration—history is violence. Metaphysics is *economy*: violence against violence, light against light: philosophy (in general). About which it can be said, by transposing Claudel's intention, that everything in it "is painted on light as if with condensed light, like the air which *becomes* frost." This becoming is war. This polemic is language itself. Its inscription.

Of transcendental violence

In addition, metaphysics, unable to escape its ancestry in light, always supposes a phenomenology in its very critique of phenomenology, and especially if, like Levinas's metaphysics, it seeks to be discourse and instruction.

A. Does metaphysics suppose this phenomenology only as a method, as a technique, in the strict sense of these words? Although he rejects the majority of the literal results of Husserl's researches, Levinas keeps to the methodological inheritance: "The presentation and development of the notions employed owes everything to the phenomenological method" (*TI*; *DL*). But are not the presentation and development of ideas but the vestments of thought? And can a method be borrowed, like a tool? Thirty years earlier, in the wake of Heidegger, did not Levinas maintain that method cannot be isolated? For method always shelters, especially in Husserl's case, "an anticipated view of the 'sense' of the being which one encounters" (*THI*). Levinas wrote at this time: "Consequently, in our exposition we cannot separate the theory of intuition, as a philosophical method, from what might be called Husserl's *ontology*" (*THI*).

Now, what the phenomenological method refers to, explicitly and in the last analysis (and this would be too easy to show), is Western philosophy's very decision, since Plato, to consider itself as science, as theory: that is, precisely as that which Levinas wishes to put into question by the ways and means of phenomenology.

B. Beyond its method, the aspect of "Husserl's essential teaching" (*TI*) which Levinas intends to retain is not only its supple and necessary descriptions, the fidelity to the meaning of experience, but also the concept of intentionality. An intentionality enlarged beyond its representative and theoretical dimension, beyond the noetico-noematical structure which Husserl incorrectly would have seen as the primordial structure. Repression of the infinite would have kept Husserl from access to the true depths of intentionality as desire and as metaphysical transcendence toward the other beyond phenomenality or Being. This repression would occur in two ways.

On the one hand, in the value of *adequation*. As vision and theoretical intuition, Husserlian intentionality would be adequation. This latter would exhaust and interiorize all distance and all true alterity. "Vision, in effect, is

essentially an adequation of exteriority to interiority: exteriority is reabsorbed in the contemplating soul, and, as an *adequate idea*, is revealed a priori, resulting in a *Sinngebung* (TI). Now, "intentionality, in which thought remains *adequation* to its object, does not define . . . consciousness at its fundamental level." Certainly Husserl is not named here, at the very moment when Levinas speaks of intentionality as adequation; one may always suppose that by the expression "intentionality, in which thought remains *adequation*," Levinas means "an intentionality such that, etc., an intentionality in which at least, etc." But the context, numerous other passages and the allusion to the *Sinngebung*, all clearly indicate that Husserl, in the letter of his texts, was unable to recognize that "as intentionality all knowledge already supposes the idea of infinity, which is adequation par excellence" (TI). Thus, supposing that Husserl had foreseen the infinite horizons which overflow objectivity and adequate intuition, he would have interpreted them, *literally*, as "thoughts aiming at objects": "What does it matter if in Husserlian phenomenology, understood literally, these unsuspected horizons are interpreted, in turn, as thoughts aiming at objects!" (cited above).

On the other hand, supposing that the Husserlian Cogito opened onto the infinite, according to Levinas, it would open onto an object-infinity, an infinity without alterity, a false infinity: "If Husserl sees in the cogito a subjectivity with no support outside itself, he is constituting the idea of infinity itself, giving it to himself as an object." The "false-infinity," a Hegelian expression which Levinas never uses, nevertheless seems to us, perhaps because it is Hegelian, to haunt numerous gestures of denunciation in *Totality and Infinity*. As it was for Hegel, the "false-infinity" for Levinas would be the indefinite, *negative* form of infinity. But, since Levinas conceives *true* alterity as nonnegativity (nonnegative transcendence), he can make the other the true infinity, and make the same (in strange complicity with negativity) the false-infinity. Which would have seemed absolutely mad to Hegel (and to all the metaphysics expanded and rethought in him): how can alterity be separated from negativity, how can alterity be separated from the "false infinity"? Or inversely, how could absolute sameness not be infinity? If, as Levinas says, the same is a violent totality, this would mean that it is a finite totality, and therefore is abstract, more other than the other (than an other totality), etc. The same as finite totality would not be the same, but still the other. Levinas would be speaking of the other under the rubric of the same, and of the same under the rubric of the other, etc. If the finite totality was the same, it could not be thought, or posed as such, without becoming other than itself (and this is war). If it did not do so, it could not enter into war with others (finite totalities), nor could it be violent. Henceforth, not being violent, it would not be the same in Levinas's sense (finite totality). Entering into war—and war there is—it is conceived, certainly, as the other's other, that is, it gains access to the other as an other (self). But again, it is no longer a totality in Levinas's sense. In this language, which is

the only language of western philosophy, can one not repeat Hegelianism, which is only this language coming into absolute possession of itself?

Under these conditions, the only effective position to take in order not to be enveloped by Hegel would seem to be, for an instant, the following: to consider the false-infinity (that is, in a profound way, original finitude) irreducible. Perhaps this is what Husserl does, at bottom, by demonstrating the irreducibility of intentional incompleteness, and therefore of alterity; and by showing that since consciousness is irreducible, it can never possibly, by its own essence, become self-consciousness, nor be reassembled absolutely close to itself in the parousia of an absolute knowledge. But can this *be said*, can one think the "false infinity" as such (time, in a word), can one pause alongside it as alongside the truth of experience, without *already* (an already which permits us to think time!) having let the *true* infinity, which then must be recognized as such, be indicated, presented, thought and stated? What we call philosophy, which perhaps is not the entirety of thought, cannot think the false, nor even choose the false, without paying homage to the anteriority and the superiority of the true (same relationship between the other and the same). This last question, which indeed could be Levinas's question to Husserl, would demonstrate that as soon as *he speaks* against Hegel, Levinas can only confirm Hegel, has confirmed him already.

But is there a more rigorously and, especially, a more literally Husserlian theme than the theme of inadequation? Of the infinite overflowing of horizons? Who was more obstinately determined than Husserl to show that vision was originally and essentially the inadequation of interiority and exteriority? And that the perception of the transcendent and extended thing was essentially and forever incomplete? That immanent perception occurred within the infinite horizon of the flux of experience? (cf., for example, *Ideas I*, paragraph 83, *passim*). And above all, who better than Levinas first gave us to understand these Husserlian themes? Therefore, it is not a question of recalling their existence, but of asking whether Husserl finally *summarized* inadequation, and reduced the infinite horizons of experience to the condition of available objects. And whether he did so by the secondary interpretation of which Levinas accuses him.

We can hardly believe so. In the two intentional directions of which we have just spoken, the *Idea in the Kantian sense* designates the infinite overflowing of a horizon which, by reason of an absolute and essential necessity which itself is absolutely principled and irreducible, *never* can become an object itself, or be completed, *equaled*, by the intuition of an object. Even by God's intuition. The horizon itself cannot become an object because it is the unobjectifiable wellspring of every object in general. This impossibility of adequation is so radical that neither the *originality* nor the *apodicticity* of evident truths are necessarily adequations. (Cf., for example, *Ideas I*, sec. 3; *Cartesian Meditations*, sec. 9, *passim*.) (Of course, this does not imply that certain possibilities of adequate evident truths—particular and founded

ones—are overlooked by Husserl.) The importance of the concept of horizon lies precisely in its inability to *make* any constitutive act *into* an object, and in that it opens the work of objectification to infinity. In phenomenology there is never a constitution of horizons, but horizons of constitution. That the infinity of the Husserlian horizon has the form of an indefinite opening, and that it offers itself without any possible end to the negativity of constitution (of the work of objectification)—does this not certainly keep it from all totalization, from the illusion of the immediate presence of a plenitudinous infinity in which the other suddenly becomes unfindable? If a consciousness of infinite inadequation to the infinite (and even to the finite) distinguishes a body of thought careful to respect exteriority, it is difficult to see how Levinas can depart from Husserl, on this point at least. Is not intentionality respect itself? The eternal irreducibility of the other to the same, but of the other *appearing as* other for the same? For without the phenomenon of other as other no respect would be possible. The phenomenon of respect supposes the respect of phenomenality. And ethics, phenomenology.

In this sense, phenomenology is respect itself, the development and becoming-language of respect itself. This was Husserl's aim in stating that reason does not tolerate being distinguished into theoretical, practical, etc. (cf. above). This does not mean that respect as ethics is *derived* from phenomenology, that it supposes phenomenology as its premise, or as a previous or superior value. The presupposition of phenomenology is of a unique kind. It "commands" nothing, in the worldly (real, political, etc.) sense of commandment. It is the very neutralization of this kind of commandment. But it does not neutralize the worldly type of commandment in order to substitute another type of commandment for it. It is profoundly foreign to all hierarchies. Which is to say that ethics not only is neither dissipated in phenomenology nor submitted to it, but that ethics finds within phenomenology its own meaning, its freedom and radicality. Moreover, it seems incontestable to us that the themes of nonpresence (temporalization and alterity) contradict that which makes phenomenology a metaphysics of presence, *working* it ceaselessly, and we emphasize this elsewhere.

C. Can Levinas separate himself from Husserl more legitimately as concerns theoretism and the primacy of the consciousness of the object? Let us not forget that the "primacy" necessarily in question here is that of the object or of objectivity *in general*. Now phenomenology has surely contributed nothing if not an infinite renewal, enlargement, and suppling of the notion of object in general. The ultimate jurisdiction of evident truths is infinitely open, is open for every type of possible object, that is, for every conceivable sense present for consciousness in general. No discourse (for example, the discourse in *Totality and Infinity* which seeks to reawaken ethical truths to their absolute independence, etc.) could be meaningful,

could be thought or understood, if it did not draw upon this layer of phenomenological evidence in general. It suffices that ethical meaning be *thought* in order for Husserl to be right. Not only nominal definitions but, before them, possibilities of essence which guide all concepts, are presupposed when one speaks of ethics, of transcendence, of infinity, etc. These expressions must have a meaning for concrete consciousness in general, or no discourse and no thought would be possible. This domain of absolutely "prior" truths is the domain of the transcendental phenomenology in which a phenomenology of ethics must take root. This rooting is not *real*, does not signify a real dependence; it would be vain to reproach transcendental phenomenology for being *in fact* incapable of engendering ethical values or behaviors (or, amounting to the same thing for being able to repress them, more or less directly). Since every determined meaning, every thought meaning, every noema (for example, the meaning of ethics) supposes the possibility of *noema in general*, it is fitting to begin *rightfully* with transcendental phenomenology. To begin *rightfully* with the general possibility of a noema which—let us recall this decisive point—is not a *real* (*reell*) moment for Husserl, and therefore is without any real (hierarchical or other) relationship to *anything else*: anything else being capable of conception only in noematicity. In particular, this means that from Husserl's point of view ethics *in fact*, in existence and in history, could not be *subordinated* to transcendental neutralization, nor be submitted to it in any way. Neither ethics, nor anything else in the world, moreover. Transcendental neutralization is in principle, by its meaning, foreign to all factuality, all existence in general. In fact it is neither before nor after ethics. Neither before nor after anything that is.

Thus, one may speak of ethical objectivity, or of ethical values or imperatives as objects (noemas) with all their originality, without reducing this objectivity to any of those which incorrectly (but the fault is not Husserl's) function as the model for what commonly is understood as objectivity (theoretical objectivity, political, technical, natural, etc. objectivity). Truthfully, there are two meanings of the theoretical: the current meaning, the one Levinas's protest particularly aims at; and the more hidden sense in which *appearance* in general is maintained, including the appearance of the nontheoretical (in the first sense) in particular. In this second sense, phenomenology is indeed a theoretism, but it is so in the extent to which all thought and all language are tied to theoretism, *de facto* and *de jure*. Phenomenology measures this extent. I know the meaning of the nontheoretical as such (for example, ethics or the metaphysical in Levinas's sense), with a theoretical knowledge (in general), and I respect it as such, as what it is, in its meaning. I have regard⁴³ for recognizing that which cannot be regarded as a thing, as a façade, as a theorem. I have regard for the face itself.

D. But, as we know, the fundamental disagreement between Levinas and Husserl is not here. Nor does it bear upon the ahistoricity of meaning with

which Levinas formerly reproached Husserl, and concerning which the latter had "held in store surprises" (as Levinas's eschatology was to surprise us thirty years later in speaking "*from beyond the totality* or history" *TI*). Which supposes, once more, that the totality is finite (a supposition in no way inscribed in its concept), that history as such can be a finite totality, and that there is no history beyond the finite totality. Perhaps one would have to show, as was suggested above, that history is impossible, meaningless, in the finite totality, and that it is impossible, meaningless, in the positive and actual infinity; that history keeps to the difference between totality and infinity, and that history precisely is that which Levinas calls transcendence and eschatology. A *system* is neither finite nor infinite. A structural totality escapes this alternative in its functioning. It escapes the archaeological and the eschatological, and inscribes them in itself.

The disagreement appears definite as concerns the Other. As we have seen: according to Levinas, by making the other, notably in the *Cartesian Meditations*, the ego's phenomenon, constituted by analogical appresentation on the basis of belonging to the ego's own sphere, Husserl allegedly missed the infinite alterity of the other, reducing it to the same. To make the other an alter ego, Levinas says frequently, is to neutralize its absolute alterity.

(a) Now, it would be easy to show the degree to which Husserl takes pains to respect, in its meaning, the alterity of the Other, particularly in the *Cartesian Meditations*. He is concerned with describing how the other *as other*, in its irreducible alterity, is presented to me. Is presented to me, as we will see later, as originary nonpresence. It is the other as other which is the ego's phenomenon: the phenomenon of a certain non-phenomenality which is irreducible for the ego as ego in general (the *eidos* ego). For it is impossible to encounter the alter ego (in the very form of the encounter⁴⁴ described by Levinas), impossible to respect it in experience and in language, if this other, in its alterity, does not *appear* for an ego (in general). One could neither speak, nor have any sense of the totally other, if there was not a phenomenon of the totally other, or evidence of the totally other as such. No one more than Husserl has been sensitive to the singular and irreducible style of this evidence, and to the original non-phenomenalization indicated within it. Even if one neither seeks nor is able to thematize the other *of which* one does not speak, but *to whom* one speaks, this impossibility and this imperative themselves can be thematized (as Levinas does) only on the basis of a certain appearance of the other as other for an ego. Husserl speaks of this *system*, of this appearance, and of the impossibility of thematizing the other in person. This is *his* problem: "They, (the other *egos*) however, are not simple representations or objects represented within me, synthetic unities of a process of verification taking place 'within me,' but precisely 'others' . . . 'subjects for this same world . . . subjects who perceive the world . . . and who thereby experience me, just as I experience the world and in it, 'others'" (*Cartesian Meditations*). It is this appearance of the other

as that which I can never be, this originary non-phenomenality, which is examined as the ego's *intentional phenomenon*.

(b) For—and here we are keeping to the most manifest and most massively incontestable meaning of the fifth of the *Cartesian Meditations* whose course is so mazelike—Husserl's most central affirmation concerns the *irreducibly mediate* nature of the intentionality aiming at the other as other. It is evident, by an essential, absolute and definitive self-evidence that the other as transcendental other (other absolute origin and other zero point in the orientation of the world), can never be given to me in an original way and in person, but only through analogical appresentation. The necessary reference to analogical appresentation, far from signifying an analogical and assimilatory reduction of the other to the same, confirms and respects separation, the unsurpassable necessity of (nonobjective) mediation. If I did not approach the other by way of analogical appresentation, if I attained to the other immediately and originally, silently, in communion with the other's own experience, the other would cease to be the other. Contrary to appearances, the theme of appresentative transposition translates the recognition of the radical separation of the absolute origins, the relationship of absolved absolutes and nonviolent respect for the secret: the opposite of victorious assimilation.

Bodies, transcendent and natural things, are others in general for my consciousness. They are outside, and their transcendence is the sign of an already irreducible alterity. Levinas does not think so; Husserl does, and thinks that "other" already means something when things are in question. Which is to take seriously the reality of the external world. Another sign of this alterity in general, which things share here with others, is that something within them too is always hidden, and is indicated only by anticipation, analogy and appresentation. Husserl states this in the fifth of the *Cartesian Meditations*: analogical appresentation belongs, to a certain extent, to *every perception*. But in the case of the other as transcendent thing, the principled possibility of an originary and original presentation of the hidden visage is always open, in principle and a priori. This possibility is absolutely rejected in the case of Others. The alterity of the transcendent thing, although already irreducible, is such only by means of the indefinite incompleteness of my original perceptions. Thus it is incomparable to the alterity of Others, which is also irreducible, and adds to the dimension of incompleteness (the body of the Other in space, the history of our relations, etc.) a more profound dimension of nonoriginality—the radical impossibility of going around to see things from the other side. But without the first alterity, the alterity of bodies (and the Other is also a body, from the beginning), the second alterity could never emerge. The system of these two alterities, the one inscribed in the other, must be thought together: the alterity of Others, therefore, by a double power of indefiniteness. The stranger is infinitely other because by his essence no enrichment of his profile can give me the subjective face

of his experience *from his perspective*, such as he has lived it. Never will this experience be given to me originally, like everything which is *mir eigenes*, which is *proper* to me. This transcendence of the nonproper no longer is that of the entirety, always inaccessible on the basis of always partial attempts: transcendence of *Infinity*, not of *Totality*.

Levinas and Husserl are quite close here. But by acknowledging in this infinitely other *as such* (appearing as such) the status of an intentional modification of the ego in general, Husserl gives himself the *right to speak* of the infinitely other as such, accounting for the origin and the legitimacy of his language. He describes the phenomenal system of nonphenomenality. Levinas *in fact* speaks of the infinitely other, but by refusing to acknowledge an intentional modification of the ego—which would be a violent and totalitarian act for him—he deprives himself of the very foundation and possibility of his own language. What authorizes him to say “infinitely other” if the infinitely other does not appear as such in the zone he calls the same, and which is the neutral level of transcendental description? To return, as to the only possible point of departure, to the intentional phenomenon in which the other appears as other, and lends itself to language, *to every possible language*, is perhaps to give oneself over to violence, or to make oneself its accomplice at least, and to *acquiesce*—in the critical sense—to the violence of the fact; but in question, then, is an irreducible zone of factuality, an original, transcendental violence, previous to every ethical choice, even supposed by ethical nonviolence. Is it meaningful to speak of a preethical violence? If the transcendental “violence” to which we allude is tied to phenomenality itself, and to the possibility of language, it then would be embedded in the root of meaning and logos, before the latter had to be determined as rhetoric, psychagogy, demagogy, etc.

(c) Levinas writes: “The other, as other, is not only an alter ego. It is what I myself am not” (*EE* and *TA*). “Decency” and “everyday life” incorrectly lead us to believe that “the other is known through sympathy, as an other like myself, as alter ego” (*TA*). This is exactly what Husserl does not do. He seeks to recognize the other as Other only in its form as ego, in its form of alterity, which cannot be that of things in the world. If the other were not recognized as a transcendental alter *ego*, it would be entirely in the world and not, as ego, the origin of the world. To refuse to see in it an ego in this sense is, within the ethical order, the very gesture of all violence. If the other was not recognized as ego, its entire alterity would collapse. Therefore, it seems that one may not suppose that Husserl makes of the other an other like myself (in the factual sense of the word), or a *real* modification of *my life*, without misconstruing his most permanent and openly stated intentions. If the Other was a real moment of my egological life, if “inclusion of an other monad within my own” (*Cartesian Meditations*) was real, I would perceive it *originaliter*. Husserl does not cease to emphasize that this is an absolute impossibility. The other as alter ego signifies the other as other,

irreducible to *my* ego, precisely because it is an ego, because it has the form of the ego. The egoity of the other permits him to say "ego" as I do; and this is why he is Other, and not a stone, or a being without speech *in my real economy*. This is why, if you will, he is face, can speak to me, understand me, and eventually command me. Dissymmetry itself would be impossible without this symmetry, which is not of the world, and which, having no real aspect, imposes no limit upon alterity and dissymmetry—makes them possible, on the contrary. This dissymmetry is an *economy* in a new sense; a sense which would probably be intolerable to Levinas.

Despite the logical absurdity of this formulation, this economy is the transcendental symmetry of two empirical asymmetries. The other, for me, is an ego which I know to be in relation to me as to an other. Where have these movements been better described than in *The Phenomenology of the Mind*? The movement of transcendence toward the other, as invoked by Levinas, would have no meaning if it did not bear within it, as one of its essential meanings, that in my ipseity I know myself to be other for the other. Without this, "I" (in general: egoity), unable to be the other's other, would never be the victim of violence. The violence of which Levinas speaks would be a violence without victim. But since, in the dissymmetry which he describes, the author of violence could never be the other himself, but always the same (ego), and since all egos are others for others, the violence without victim would be also a violence without author. And all these propositions can be reversed without difficulty. It will be easily understood that if the Parmenides of the *Poem* gives us to believe, through interposed historical phantasms, that he lent himself to parricide several times, the great and fearful white shadow which spoke to the young Socrates continues to smile when we undertake grand discourses on separate beings, unity, difference, the same and the other. To what exercises would Parmenides give himself over, at the frontiers of *Totality and Infinity*, if we attempted to make him understand that *ego* equals *same*, and that the other is what it is only as the absolute infinitely other absolved of its relationship to the Same. For example: (1) The infinitely other, he would say perhaps, can be what it is only if it is other, that is, other *than*. *Other than* must be *other than* myself. Henceforth, it is no longer absolved of a relation to an ego. Therefore, it is no longer infinitely, absolutely other. It is no longer what it is. If it was absolved, it would not be the other either, but the Same. (2) The infinitely other cannot be what it is—infinitely other—except by being absolutely not the same. That is, in particular, by being other than itself (non ego). Being other than itself, it is not what it is. Therefore, it is not infinitely other, etc.

At bottom, we believe, this exercise is not just verbiage, or dialectical virtuosity in the "play of the Same." It would mean that the expression "infinitely other" or "absolutely other" cannot be stated and thought simultaneously; that the other cannot be absolutely exterior⁴⁵ to the same without

ceasing to be other; and that, consequently, the same is not a totality closed in upon itself, an identity playing with itself, having only the appearance of alterity, in what Levinas calls economy, work, and history. How could there be a "play of the Same" if alterity itself was not already *in* the Same, with a meaning of inclusion doubtless betrayed by the word *in*? Without alterity *in* the same, how could the "play of the Same" occur, in the sense of playful activity, or of dislocation, in a machine or organic totality which *plays* or *works*? And it could be shown that for Levinas work, always enclosed inside totality and history, fundamentally remains a game. A proposition that we can accept, with several precautions, more easily than he.

Finally, let us confess our total deafness to propositions of this type: "Being occurs as multiple, and as divided into Same and Other. This is its ultimate structure" (TI). What is the division of *being between* the same and the other? Is it a division *between* the same and the other, which does not suppose, at very least, that the same *is* the other's other, and the other the same as oneself? We are not only thinking of Parmenides' exercise, playing with the young Socrates. The Stranger in the *Sophist* who, like Levinas, seems to break with Eleatism in the name of alterity, knows that alterity can be thought only as negativity, and above all, can be *said* only as negativity, which Levinas begins by refusing; he knows too, that differing from Being, the other is always relative, is stated *pros eteron*, which does not prevent it from being an *eidos* (or a *genre*, in a nonconceptual sense), that is, from being the same as itself ("same as itself" already supposing, as Heidegger notes in *Identity and Difference*, precisely as concerns the *Sophist*, mediation, relation, and difference: *eksastan auto tauton*). Levinas, from his perspective, would refuse to assimilate the Other to the *eteron* in question here. But how can the "Other" be thought or said without reference—we do not say reduction—to the alterity of the *eteron* in general? This last notion, henceforth, no longer has the restricted meaning which permits its simple opposition to the notion of *Other*, as if it was confined to the region of real or logical objectivity. The *eteron*, here, belongs to a more profound and original zone than that in which this philosophy of subjectivity (that is, of objectivity), still implicated in the notion of the Other, is expanded.

The other, then, would not be what he is (my fellow man as foreigner) if he were not alter ego. This is a self-evidence greatly prior to "decency" and to the dissimulations of "daily life." Does not Levinas treat the expression *alter ego* as if *alter* were the epithet of a real subject (on a pre-eidetic level)? As an epithetical, accidental modification of my real (empirical) identity? Now, the transcendental syntax of the expression *alter ego* tolerates no relationship of substantive to adjective, of absolute to epithet, in one sense or the other. This is its strangeness. A necessity due to the finitude of meaning: the other is absolutely other only if he is an ego, that is, in a certain way, if he is the same as I. Inversely, the other as *res* is simultaneously less other (not absolutely other) and less "the same" than I. Simultaneously more and

less other, which means, once more, that the absolute of alterity is the same. And this contradiction (in terms of a formal logic which Levinas follows for once, since he refuses to call the other *alter ego*), this impossibility of translating my relation to the Other into the rational coherence of language—this contradiction and this impossibility are not the signs of “irrationality”: they are the sign, rather, that one may no longer draw inspiration from *within* the coherence of the *Logos*, but that thought is stifled in the region of the origin of language as dialogue and difference. This origin, as the concrete condition of rationality, is nothing less than “irrational,” but it could not be “included” in language. This origin is an inscribed inscription.

Further, every reduction of the other to a *real* moment of *my* life, its reduction to the state of empirical alter-ego, is an empirical possibility, or rather eventuality, which is called violence; and violence presupposes the necessary eidetic relationships envisaged in Husserl’s descriptions. For, on the contrary, to gain access to the egoity of the alter ego as if to its alterity itself is the most peaceful gesture possible. *We do not say absolutely peaceful.* We say *economical*. There is a transcendental and preethical violence, a (general) dissymmetry whose archia is the same, and which eventually permits the inverse dissymmetry, that is, the ethical nonviolence of which Levinas speaks. In effect, *either* there is only the same, which can no longer even appear and be said, nor even exercise violence (pure infinity or finitude); *or* indeed there is the same *and* the other, and then the other cannot be the other—of the same—except by being the same (as itself: ego), and the same cannot be the same (as itself: ego) except by being the other’s other: alter ego. That I am also essentially the other’s other, and that I know I am, is the evidence of a strange symmetry whose trace appears nowhere in Levinas’s descriptions. Without this evidence, I could not desire (or) respect the other in ethical dissymmetry. This transcendental violence, which does not spring from an ethical resolution or freedom, or from a *certain way* of encountering or exceeding the other, originally institutes the relationship between two finite ipseities. In effect, the necessity of gaining access to the meaning of the other (in its irreducible alterity) on the basis of its “face,” that is, its nonphenomenal phenomenon, its nonthematic theme, in other words, on the basis of an intentional modification of my ego (in general), (an intentional modification upon which Levinas indeed must base the meaning of his discourse); and the necessity of speaking of the other as other, or to the other as other, on the basis of its appearing-for-me-as-what-it-is: the other (an appearing which dissimulates its essential dissimulation, takes it out of the light, stripping it, and hiding that which is hidden in the other), as the necessity from which no discourse can escape, from its earliest origin—these necessities are violence itself, or rather the transcendental origin of an irreducible violence, supposing, as we said above, that it is somehow meaningful to speak of preethical violence. For this transcendental origin, as the irreducible violence of the relation to the other, is at the same time

nonviolence, since it opens the relation to the other. It is an *economy*. And it is this economy which, by this opening, will permit access to the other to be determined, in ethical freedom, as moral violence or nonviolence. It is difficult to see how the notion of violence (for example, as the dissimulation or oppression of the other by the same, a notion which Levinas employs as self-evident, and which, however, already signifies alteration of the same, of the other as what it is) could be determined rigorously on a purely ethical level, without prior eidetic-transcendental analysis of the relations between ego and alter-ego in general, between several origins of the world in general. That the other appears as such only in its relationship to the same, is a self-evidence that the Greeks had no need to acknowledge in the transcendental egology which would confirm it later; and, it is violence as the origin of meaning and of discourse in the reign of finitude.⁴⁶ The difference between the same and the other, which is not a difference or a relation among others, has no meaning in the infinite, except to speak, as Hegel does and against Levinas, of the anxiety of the infinite which determines and negates itself. Violence, certainly, appears within the horizon of an idea of the infinite. But this horizon is not the horizon of the infinitely other, but of a reign in which the difference between the same and the other, *différance*, would no longer be valid, that is, of a reign in which peace itself would no longer have meaning. And first of all because there would be no more phenomenality or meaning in general. The infinitely other and the infinitely same, if these words have meaning for a finite being, is the same. Hegel himself recognized negativity, anxiety or war in the infinite absolute only as the movement of the absolute's own history, whose horizon is a final pacification in which alterity would be absolutely *encapsulated*, if not lifted up, in *parousia*.⁴⁷ How are we to interpret the *necessity of thinking the fact of what is first of all on the horizon* in what is generally called the end of history? Which amounts to asking what the *thought* of the other *as other* means, and whether or not the light of the "as such" is dissimulation in this unique case. Unique case? No, we must reverse the terms: "other" is the name, "other" is the meaning of this unthinkable unity of light and night. What "other" means is phenomenality as disappearance. Is it a question, here, of a "third route excluded by these contradictory ones" (revelation and dissimulation, *The Trace of the Other*)? But this route cannot appear, cannot be stated as tertiary. If it is called "trace," the word can emerge only as a metaphor whose philosophical elucidation will ceaselessly call upon "contradictions." Without which its originality—that which distinguishes it from the *Sign* (the word conventionally chosen by Levinas)—would not appear. For it *must* be made to appear. And the phenomenon supposes original contamination by the sign.

War, therefore, is congenital to phenomenality, is the very emergence of speech and of appearing. Hegel does not abstain by chance from pronouncing the word "man" in the *Phenomenology of the Mind*; and he describes war

(for example, the dialectic of the Master and the Slave) without anthropological reference, within the realm of a science of *consciousness*, that is, of phenomenality itself, in the necessary structure of its movement: a science of experience and of consciousness.

Discourse, therefore, if it is originally violent, can only *do itself violence*, can only negate itself in order to affirm itself, make war upon the war which institutes it without ever *being able* to reappropriate this negativity, to the extent that it is discourse. *Necessarily* without reappropriating it, for if it did so, the horizon of peace would disappear into the night (worst violence as previolence). This secondary war, as the avowal of violence, is the least possible violence, the only way to repress the worst violence, the violence of primitive and prelogical silence, of an unimaginable night which would not even be the opposite of day, an absolute violence which would not even be the opposite of nonviolence: nothingness or pure non-sense. Thus discourse chooses itself violently in opposition to nothingness or pure non-sense, and, in philosophy, against nihilism. For this not to be so, the eschatology which animates Levinas's discourse would have to have had kept its promise already, even to the extent of no longer being able to occur within discourse as eschatology, and as the idea of a peace "beyond history." The "messianic triumph" "armed against evil's revenge" would have to have been ushered in. This messianic triumph, which is the horizon of Levinas's book, but which "overflows its framework" (*TI*), could abolish violence only by suspending the difference (conjunction or opposition) between the same and the other, that is, by suspending the *idea* of peace. But here and now (in a present in general), this horizon cannot be stated, an end cannot be stated, eschatology is not possible, except *through violence*. This infinite passage through violence is what is called history. To overlook the irreducibility of this last violence, is to revert—within the order of philosophical discourse which one cannot *seek to reject*, except by risking the *worst violence*—to an infinitist dogmatism in pre-Kantian style, one which does not pose the question of responsibility for its own finite philosophical discourse. It is true that the delegation of this responsibility to God is not an abdication, God not being a finite third party: thus conceived, divine responsibility neither excludes nor diminishes the integrity of my own responsibility, the responsibility of the finite philosopher. On the contrary, divine responsibility requires and calls for this latter responsibility, as its telos or its origin. But the *fact* of the inadequation of these two responsibilities, or of this unique responsibility for itself—this history or anxiety of the infinite—is not yet a *theme* for the pre-Kantian, or rather even pre-Hegelian, rationalists.

Nor will it be so for as long as the absolutely principal self-evidence, in Levinas's own terms, of "the impossibility for the ego not to be itself" is not dissolved. The ego cannot not be itself even when it ventures out toward the other, nor could it venture forth with this impossibility, which thus "marks

the innate tragedy of the ego, the fact that it is riveted to its own being" (*EE*), according to Levinas's strong statement. And above all, marks the fact that the ego knows this. This knowledge is the first discourse and first word of eschatology; it is that which permits separation and speaking to the other. It is not a knowledge among others, but is knowledge itself. "It is this 'always-being-one-and-yet-always-other' which is the fundamental characteristic of knowledge, etc." (Schelling). No philosophy responsible for its language can renounce ipseity in general, and the philosophy or eschatology of separation may do so less than any other. Between original tragedy and messianic triumph there is *philosophy*, in which violence is returned against violence within knowledge, in which original finitude appears, and in which the other is respected within, and by, the same. This finitude makes its appearance in an irreducibly open question which is the *philosophical question in general*: *why* is the essential, irreducible, absolutely general and unconditioned form of experience as a venturing forth toward the other still egoity? *Why* is an experience which would not be lived as *my own* (for an ego in general, in the eidetic-transcendental sense of these words) impossible and unthinkable? This unthinkable and impossible are the limits of reason in general. In other words. *why finitude*, if, as Schelling had said, "egoity is the general principle of finitude"? And *why Reason*, if it is true that "Reason and Egoity, in their true Absoluteness, are one and the same" (Schelling), and true that "reason . . . is a kind of universal and essential structure of transcendental subjectivity in general" (Husserl)? The philosophy which is the discourse of this reason as phenomenology cannot answer such a question by essence, for every answer can be made only in language, and language is opened by the question. Philosophy (in general) can only open itself to the question, within it and by it. It can only *let itself be questioned*.

Husserl knew this. And he called the irreducibly egoic essence of experience "archi-factuality" (*Urtatsache*), nonempirical factuality, transcendental factuality (a notion to which attention has never been paid, perhaps). "This *I am* is for me, for the I who says it and understands it accordingly, the *primordial intentional foundation of my world* (*der intentionale Urgrund für meine Welt*)."⁴⁸ *My world* is the opening in which all experience occurs, including, as the experience par excellence, that which is transcendence toward the Other as such. Nothing can appear outside the appurtenance to "my world" for an "I am." "Whether it is suitable or not, whether it appears to me monstrous (due to whatever prejudices) or not, *I must stand firm before the primordial fact* (*die Urtatsache, der ich standhalten muss*), from which I cannot turn my glance for an instant, as a philosopher. For philosophical children this indeed may be the dark corner to which the ghosts of solipsism, or of psychologism or relativism, return. The true philosopher will prefer, instead of fleeing from these ghosts, to illuminate the dark corner."⁴⁹ Understood in this sense, the intentional relationship of "ego to my world" cannot be opened on the basis of an infinite-other radically

foreign to "my world," nor can it be imposed upon me by a God who determines this relationship: "The subjective a priori is that which precedes the Being of God and of everything, without exception, which exists for me, a thinking being. God too, is for me what he is by my own conscious production; I cannot look away from this in the anguished fear of what may be considered blasphemy, but on the contrary must see in it the problem. Here too, just as concerning the *alter ego*, 'conscious production' does not mean that I invent and fashion this supreme transcendence."⁵⁰ God no more really depends upon me than does the *alter-ego*. But he has *meaning* only for an ego in general. Which means that before all atheism or all faith, before all theology, before all language about God or with God, God's divinity (the infinite alterity of the infinite other, for example) must have a meaning for an ego in general. Let us note in passing that the "subjective a priori" recognized by transcendental phenomenology is the only possible way to check the totalitarianism of the neutral, the impersonal "absolute Logic," that is, eschatology without dialogue and everything classed under the conventional—quite conventional—rubric of Hegelianism.

The question about egoity as transcendental archi-factuality can be repeated more profoundly in the direction of the archi-factuality of the "living present." For egological life has as its irreducible and absolutely universal form the living present. There is no experience which can be lived other than in the present. The absolute impossibility of living other than in the present, this eternal impossibility, defines the unthinkable as the limit of reason. The notion of a past whose meaning could not be thought in the form of a (past) present marks the *impossible-unthinkable-unstatable* not only for philosophy in general but even for a thought of being which would seek to take a step outside philosophy. This notion, however, does become a theme in the meditation of the trace announced in Levinas's most recent writings. In the living present, the notion of which is at once the most simple and most difficult of notions, all temporal alterity can be constituted and appear as such: as other past present, other future present, other absolute origins relived in intentional modification, in the unity and actuality of my living present. Only the actual unity of my living present permits other presents (other absolute origins) from appearing as such, in what is called memory or anticipation (for example, but in truth in the constant movement of temporalization). But only the alterity of past and future presents permits the absolute identity of the living present as the self-identity of non-self identity. One would have to show,⁵¹ on the basis of the *Cartesian Meditations*, and given the reduction of every problem of factual genesis, how the question of *anteriority* in the relation between the constitution of other as *other present* and the constitution of the other as *Others* is a false question, which must refer to a common structural root. Although in the *Cartesian Meditations* Husserl evokes only the *analogy* of the two movements (Sec. 52), in many of the unpublished works he seems to hold them to be inseparable.

In the last analysis, if one wishes to determine violence as the necessity that the other not appear as what it is, that it not be respected except in, for, and by the same, that it be dissimulated by the same in the very freeing of its phenomenon, then time is violence. This movement of freeing absolute alterity in the absolute same is the movement of temporalization in its most absolutely unconditioned universal form: the living present. If the living present, the absolute form of the opening of time to the other in itself, is the absolute form of egological life, and if egoity is the absolute form of experience, then the present, the presence of the present, and the present of presence, are all originally and forever violent. The living present is originally marked by death. Presence as violence is the meaning of finitude, the meaning of meaning as history.

But why? Why finitude? Why history?⁵² And why may we, on what basis may we, examine this violence as finitude and as history? Why the why? And from whence does it permit itself to be understood in its philosophical determination?

Levinas's metaphysics in a sense presupposes—at least we have attempted to show this—the transcendental phenomenology that it seeks to put into question. And yet the legitimacy of this putting into question does not seem to us any less radical. What is the origin of the question about transcendental archi-factuality as violence? Upon what basis does one ask questions about finitude as violence? Upon what basis does the original violence of discourse permit itself to be commanded to be returned against itself, to be always, as language, the return against itself which recognizes the other as other? Of course, one cannot *answer* these questions (for example, by saying that the question about the violence of finitude can be posed only on the basis of finitude's other and the idea of infinity), except by undertaking a new discourse which once more will seek to justify transcendental phenomenology. But the naked opening of the question, its silent opening, escapes phenomenology, as the origin and end of phenomenology's logos. The silent opening of the question about history as finitude and violence permits the appearance of history *as such*; it is the call (to) (of) an eschatology which dissimulates its own opening, covers this opening with its own noise as soon as the opening stands forth and is determined. This is the opening of a question, in the inversion of transcendental dissymmetry, put to philosophy as logos, finitude, history, violence: an interpellation of the Greek by the non-Greek at the heart of a silence, an ultralogical affect of speech, a question which can be stated only by being forgotten in the language of the Greeks; and a question which can be stated, as forgotten, only in the language of the Greeks. The strange dialogue of speech and silence. The strange community of the silent question of which we spoke above. It seems to us that this is the point at which, beyond any misunderstandings about Husserl's literal ambitions, phenomenology and eschatology can *open* a dialogue interminably, *be opened* in it, calling each other to silence.

Of ontological violence

Silence is a word which is not a word, and breath an object which is not an object.

(G. Bataille)

Does not the movement of this dialogue also govern the explication with Heidegger? It would not be surprising. To be persuaded of this, it would suffice to notice, in the most schematic way possible, the following: in order to speak, as we have just spoken, of the present as the absolute form of experience, one *already* must understand *what time is*, must understand the *ens of the praes-ens*, and the proximity of the *Being of this ens*. The present of presence and the presence of the present suppose the horizon, the pre-comprehending anticipation of Being as time. If the meaning of Being always has been determined by philosophy as presence, then the *question of Being*, posed on the basis of the transcendental horizon of time (first stage, in *Being and Time*) is the first tremor of philosophical security, as it is of self-confident presence.

Now, Husserl never unfolded this question of Being. If phenomenology carries this question within itself each time that it considers the themes of temporalization, and of the relationship to the alter ego, it nonetheless remains dominated by a metaphysics of presence. The question of Being does not govern its discourse.

Phenomenology in general, as the passageway to essentiality, presupposes an anticipation of the *esse* of essence, the unity of the *esse* prior to its distribution into essence and existence. Via another route, one could probably show that Husserl silently presupposes a metaphysical anticipation or decision when, for example, he affirms Being (*Sein*) as the nonreality (*Realität*) of the ideal (*Ideal*). Ideality is unreal, but it *is*—as object or as thought-being. Without a presupposed access to a meaning of Being not exhausted by reality, the entire Husserlian theory of ideality would collapse, and with it all of transcendental phenomenology. For example, Husserl could no longer write: "Offenbar muss überhaupt jeder Versuch, das Sein des Idealen in ein mögliches Sein von Realem umzudeuten, daran scheitern, dass Möglichkeiten selbst wieder ideale Gegenstände sind. So wenig in der realen Welt Zahlen im allgemeinen, Dreiecke im allgemeinen zu finden sind so wenig Möglichkeiten" ("Manifestly every attempt to reinterpret the Being of the ideal as a possible Being of the real must fail, on the whole, for the possibilities themselves are in turn ideal. In the real world, one finds as few possibilities as one does numbers in general, or triangles in general)."⁵³ The meaning of Being—before each of its regional determinations—must be thought *first*, if one is to distinguish the ideal which *is* not only from the real which it is *not*, but also from the fictional which belongs to the domain of

the possible real. ("Naturally, it is not our intention to place the *Being of the ideal* on the same level as the *Being-thought of the fictional or the absurd*."⁵⁴ Hundreds of analogous texts could be cited.) But if Husserl can write this, and if, therefore, he presupposes access to a meaning of Being in general, how can he distinguish his idealism as a theory of knowledge from metaphysical idealism? The latter too, posited the unreal Being of the ideal. Husserl doubtless would respond, thinking of Plato, that the ideal was *realized* within metaphysical idealism, that is, that it was substantified, hypostasized, as soon as it was not understood essentially, in each of its aspects, as noema, and as soon as one imagined that it could be without in some way being thought or envisaged. This situation would not have been totally modified later when the *eidos* became originally and essentially noema only in the Understanding or Logos of an infinite subject: God. But to what extent does transcendental idealism, whose way is opened thereby, escape the horizon—at the very least—of this infinite subjectivity? This cannot be debated here.

However, if he had previously opposed Heidegger to Husserl, Levinas now contests what he calls "Heideggerean ontology": "The primacy of ontology for Heidegger does not rest on the truism, 'To know the *existent* it is necessary to have comprehended the Being of the existent.' To affirm the priority of *Being* over the *existent* is to decide the essence of philosophy; it is to subordinate the relation with *someone*, who is an existent, (the ethical relation) to a relation with the *Being of the existent*, which, impersonal, permits the apprehension, the domination of the existent (a relationship of knowing), subordinates justice to freedom" (*TI*, p. 45). This ontology would be valid for every existent, "except for the Other."⁵⁵

Levinas's phrase overwhelms "ontology": not only would the thought of the Being of the existent have the impoverished logic of the truism, but it escapes this poverty only in order to seize and to murder the Other. It is a laughably self-evident but criminal truism, which places ethics under the heel of ontology.

Therefore, what of "ontology" and the "truism" ("in order to know the *existent* it is necessary to have comprehended the Being of the existent")? Levinas says that "the primacy of ontology does not rest" on a "truism." Is this certain? If the *truism* (*true, truth*) is fidelity to truth (that is, to the Being of what is as what it is, and such as it is), it is not certain that thought (Heidegger, for example) has ever sought to avoid it. "What is strange about this thought of Being is its simplicity," says Heidegger, at the very moment, moreover, when he demonstrates that this thought entertains no theoretical or practical aims. "The accomplishment of this thought is neither theoretical nor practical; no more does it consist in the union of these two modes of behavior."⁵⁶ Is not this gesture of return to what is within the dissociation of theory and practice also Levinas's gesture?⁵⁷ Does he not have to define metaphysical transcendence, therefore, as a not (yet) practical ethics? We are concerned here with some rather strange truisms. It is "by the simplicity of its essence" that "the thought of Being makes itself unknowable for us."⁵⁸

If, on the contrary, by "truism" one understands, in the realm of *judgment*, analytic affirmation and the poverty of tautology, then the incriminated proposition is perhaps the least analytic of all; for if there were to be only one thought in the world which escapes the form of the truism, it would be this one. First, what Levinas envisages in the word "truism" is not a judicative proposition but a truth previous to judgment, which in turn founds all possible judgment. A banal truism is the repetition of the subject in the predicate. Now, Being is not simply a predicate of the existent, no more than it is the existent's subject. If it is taken as essence or as existence (as Being-such or Being-there), if it is taken as copula or as position of existence, or, more profoundly and more originally, if it is taken as the unitary focal point of all these possibilities, then the Being of the existent does not belong to the realm of predication, because it is already implied in all predication in general, and makes predication possible. And it makes every synthetic or analytic judgment possible. It is beyond genre and categories, transcendental in the scholastic sense, before scholasticism had made of the transcendental a supreme and infinite existent, God himself. It must be a singular truism that, through which is sought, in the most profound way, as the most concrete thought of all thoughts, the common root of essence and existence, without which no judgment, no language would be possible, and which every concept can only presuppose, by dissimulating it.⁵⁹ But if "ontology" is not a truism, or at least a truism among others, and if the strange difference between Being and the existent has a meaning, or is meaning, can one speak of the "priority" of Being in relation to the existent? An important question, here, for it is this alleged "priority" which, for Levinas, would enslave ethics to "ontology."

There can be an order of priority only between two determined things, two existents. Being, since *it is nothing* outside the existent, a theme which Levinas had commented upon so well previously, could in no way *precede* the existent, whether in time, or in dignity, etc. Nothing is more clear, as concerns this, in Heidegger's thought. Henceforth, one cannot legitimately speak of the "subordination" of the existent to Being, or, for example, of the ethical relation to the ontological relation. To precomprehend or explicate the implicit relation of Being to the existent⁶⁰ is not to submit the existent (for example, someone) to Being in a violent fashion. Being is but the *Being-of* this existent, and does not exist outside it as a foreign power, or as a hostile or neutral impersonal element. The neutrality so often denounced by Levinas can only be the characteristic of an undetermined existent, of an anonymous ontic power, of a conceptual generality, or of a principle. Now, Being is not a principle, is not a principal existent, an *archia* which would permit Levinas to insert the face of a faceless tyrant under the name of Being. The thought of Being (of the existent) is radically foreign to the search for a principle, or even for a root (although certain images lead us to believe this, occasionally), or for a "tree of knowledge": it is, as we have

seen, beyond theory, and is not the first word of theory. It is even beyond all hierarchies. If every "philosophy," every "metaphysics," has always sought to determine the first existent, the excellent and truly existent existent, then the thought of the Being of the existent is not this metaphysics or first philosophy. It is not even ontology (cf. above), if ontology is another name for first philosophy. Since it is not first philosophy concerned with the archi-existent, that is, the first thing or first cause which governs, then the thought of Being is neither concerned with, nor exercises, any power. For power is a relationship between existents. "Such thinking has no result. It produces no effect" (*Humanismus*). Levinas writes: "Ontology, as first philosophy, is a philosophy of power" (*TI*). This is perhaps true. But we have just seen that the thought of Being is neither ontology, nor first philosophy, nor a philosophy of power. Foreign to every first philosophy, it is not opposed to any kind of first philosophy. Not even to morals, if, as Levinas says, "morals is not a branch of philosophy but first philosophy" (*TI*). *Foreign* to the search for an ontic *archia* in general, for an ethical or political *archia* in particular, it is not *foreign*, in the sense understood by Levinas who accuses it precisely of this foreignness, in the way violence is foreign to nonviolence, or evil to good. One may say of it what Alain said of philosophy: it "is no more politics" (or ethics) . . . "than it is agriculture." Which does not mean that it is an industry. Radically foreign to ethics, it is not a counterethics, nor a subordination of ethics to a function in the realm of ethics that is already secretly violent: the neutral. Levinas always reconstructs, and not only in the case of Heidegger, the *polis* or kind of social organization whose delicate outline he believes can be traced through a discourse offered neither as sociological, nor as political, nor as ethical. Thus it is paradoxical to see the Heideggerean city governed by a neutral power, by an anonymous discourse, that is, by the "one" (*man*) whose inauthenticity Heidegger was the first to describe. And if it is true, in a difficult sense, that the Logos, according to Heidegger, "is the Logos of no one," this certainly does not mean that it is the anonymity of oppression, the impersonality of the State, or the neutrality of the "one says." It is anonymous only as the *possibility* of the name and of responsibility. "But if man must one day arrive in the neighborhood of Being, he must first learn to exist in that which has no name" (*Humanism*). Did not the Kabbala also speak of the unnameable possibility of the Name?

The thought of Being, therefore, can have no *human* design, secret or not. Taken by itself, it is doubtless the only thought which no anthropology, no ethics, and above all, no ethico-anthropological psychoanalysis will ever enclose.⁶¹

Quite the contrary. Not only is the thought of Being not ethical violence, but it seems that no ethics—in Levinas's sense—can be opened without it. Thought—or at least the precomprehension of Being—*conditions* (in its own fashion, which excludes every ontic conditionality: principles, causes,

premises, etc.) the *recognition* of the essence of the existent (for example someone, existent *as other*, *as other self*, etc.). It conditions the *respect* for the other *as what it is*: other. Without this acknowledgment, which is not a knowledge, or let us say without this "letting-be" of an existent (Other) as something existing outside me in the essence of what it is (first in its alterity), no ethics would be possible. "To let be" is an expression of Heidegger's which does not mean, as Levinas seems to think,⁶² to let be as an "object of comprehension first," and, in the case of the Other, as "interlocutor afterward." The "letting-be" concerns all possible forms of the existent, and even those which, *by essence*, cannot be transformed into "objects of comprehension."⁶³ If it belongs to the essence of the Other first and foremost to be an "interlocutor" and to be "interpellated," then the "letting-be" will let the Other be what it is, will respect it as interpellated-interlocutor. The "letting-be" does not only, or by privilege, concern impersonal things. To let the other be in its existence and essence as other means that what gains access to thought, or (*and*) what thought gains access to, is that which is essence and that which is existence; and that which is the Being which they both presuppose. Without this, no letting-be would be possible, and first of all, the letting be of respect and of the ethical commandment addressing itself to freedom. Violence would reign to such a degree that it would no longer even be able to appear and be named.

Therefore, the "relation to the Being of the existent" cannot possibly dominate the "relation to the existent." Heidegger not only would criticize the notion of a *relation* to Being, just as Levinas criticizes that of a *relation to the other*, but also the notion of *domination*: Being is not elevated, is not the land of the existent, for elevation belongs to the existent. There are few themes which have demanded Heidegger's insistence to this extent: Being is not an excellent existent.

That Being is not *above* the existent does not imply that it is *beside* it. For then it would be another existent. Therefore, it is difficult to speak of "the ontological significance of the *existent* in the general economy of Being— which Heidegger simply places *beside* Being through a distinction . . ." (EE) It is true that Levinas acknowledges elsewhere that "if there is distinction, there is not separation" (TA); and this is already to acknowledge the impossibility of every relationship of ontic domination between Being and existent. In reality, there is not even a *distinction* in the usual sense of the word, between Being and existent. For reasons of essence, and first because Being is nothing outside the existent, and because the opening amounts to the ontico-ontological difference, it is impossible to avoid the ontic metaphor in order to articulate Being in language, in order to let Being circulate in language. This is why Heidegger says of language that it is "*lichtend-verbergende Ankunft des seins selbst*" (*Humanismus*). At one and the same time language illuminates and hides Being itself. Nevertheless, Being itself is *alone* in its absolute resistance to *every metaphor*. Every philology which

allegedly reduces the *meaning* of Being to the metaphorical origin of the word "Being," whatever the historical (scientific) value of its hypotheses, misses the history of the meaning of Being. This history is to such an extent the history of a liberation of Being as concerns the determined existent, that one existent among others has come to be thought of as the eponymous existent of Being, for example, *respiration*. Renan and Nietzsche, for example, refer to respiration as the etymological origin of the word *Being* when they wish to reduce the meaning of what they take to be a concept—the indeterminate generality of Being—to its modest metaphorical origin. (Renan: *On the Origin of Language*. Nietzsche: *The Birth of Philosophy*).⁶⁴ Thus is explained all of empirical history, except precisely for the essential, that is, the thought that respiration and *non-respiration are*, for example. And are in a determined way, among other ontic determinations. Etymological empiricism, the hidden root of all empiricism, explains everything except that at a given moment the metaphor, has been thought *as* metaphor, that is, has been ripped apart as the veil of Being. This moment is the emergence of the thought of Being itself, the very movement of metaphoricity. For this emergence still, and always, occurs beneath an *other* metaphor. As Hegel says somewhere, empiricism always forgets, at very least, that it employs the words to be. Empiricism is thinking *by* metaphor without thinking the metaphor *as such*.

Concerning "Being" and "respiration," let us permit ourselves a juxtaposition which does not only have the value of a historical curiosity. In a letter to X . . . , dated March 1638, Descartes explains that the proposition "I breathe, therefore I am" concludes nothing, if it has not been proven previously that one exists, or if one does not imply: *I think that I breathe* (even if I am mistaken in this), therefore I am; and it is nothing other to state in this sense *I breathe, therefore I am* than *I think, therefore I am*." Which means, in terms of what concerns us here, that the *meaning* of respiration is always but a dependent and particular determination of my thought and my existence, and a fortiori of thought and of Being in general. Supposing that the word "Being" is derived from a word meaning "respiration" (or any other determined thing), no etymology or philology—as such, and as determined sciences—will be able to account for the thought for which "respiration" (or any other determined thing) becomes a determination of Being among others. Here, for example, no philology will be able to account for the gesture of Descartes's thought. One must travel other roads—or an other reading of Nietzsche—in order to trace the genealogy of the unheard-of meaning of Being.

This is a first reason why the "relation with an existent," with someone (the ethical relation), cannot be "dominated" by "a relation with the Being of the existent (a relation of knowledge)."

Second reason: the "relation with the Being of the existent," which is in no way a relation, above all is not a "relation of knowledge."⁶⁵ It is not a

theory, as we have seen, and teaches us nothing about what is. It is because it is not science that Heidegger sometimes refuses it even the name of ontology, after having distinguished it from metaphysics, and even from fundamental ontology. Since it is not knowledge, the thought of Being is not to be confused with the concept of pure Being as undetermined generality. Formerly, Levinas had given us to understand this: "Precisely because Being is not an existent, it must not be apprehended *per genus et differentiam specificam*" (EDE). Now, according to Levinas, all violence is a violence of the concept; and both *Is Ontology Fundamental?* and *Totality and Infinity* interpret the thought of Being as a concept of Being. Opposing himself to Heidegger, Levinas writes, among many other similar passages: "In our relation with the Other, the latter does not affect us on the basis of a concept" (*Is Ontology Fundamental?*). According to Levinas, it is finally the absolutely undetermined concept of Being which offers the Other to our understanding, that is, to our power and our violence. Now Heidegger is emphatic on this point: the Being *which is in question* is not the concept to which the existent (for example, someone) is to be submitted (subsumed). Being is not the concept of a rather indeterminate and abstract predicate, seeking to cover the totality of existents in its extreme universality: (1) because it is not a predicate, and authorizes all predication; (2) because it is "older" than the concrete *presence* of the *ens*; (3) because belonging to Being does not cancel any predicative difference, but, on the contrary, permits the emergence of every possible difference.⁶⁶ Being is therefore transcategorical, and Heidegger would say of it what Levinas says of the other: it is "refractory to the category" (TI). "The question of Being as a question of the possibility of the concept of Being arises from the preconceptual comprehension of Being,"⁶⁷ writes Heidegger, opening a dialogue and a repetition, (as concerns the Hegelian concept of pure Being as nothingness), which will not cease to deepen and, in the style which is almost always that of Heidegger's dialogue with the thinkers of tradition, will not cease to permit Hegel's discourse to grow and to speak—Hegel's discourse as that of all of metaphysics (Hegel included, or rather, being entirely included in Hegel).

Thus, the thought or pre-comprehension of Being signifies nothing less than a conceptual or totalitarian com-prehension. What we have just said of Being could also be said of the same.⁶⁸ To treat Being (and the same) as categories, or to treat the "relationship to Being" as a relation to a category which itself could be (by "reversal of terms," TI) posed afterward, or subordinated to a determined relation (an ethical relation, for example)—is this not to forbid oneself every determination (the ethical one, for example) from the outset? Every determination, in effect, presupposes the thought of Being. Without it, how can one give meaning to Being as other, as other self, to the irreducibility of the existence and the essence of the other, and to the consequent responsibility? etc. "This prerogative . . . of being answerable

to oneself as essent, in short, this prerogative of existing, involves in itself the necessity of a comprehension of Being."⁶⁹ If to understand Being is to be able to let be (that is, to respect Being in essence and existence, and to be responsible for one's respect), then the understanding of Being always concerns alterity, and par excellence the alterity of the Other in all its originality: one can have to let be only that which one is not. If Being is always to be let be, and if to think is to let Being be, then Being is indeed the other of thought. But since it is what it is only by the letting-be of thought, and since the latter is thought only by virtue of the presence of the Being which it lets be, then thought and Being, thought and the other, are the same; which, let us recall, does not mean identical, or one, or equal.

This amounts to stating that the thinking of Being does not make of the other a species of the genre Being. Not only because the other is "refractory to the category," but because Being is not a category. Like the Other, Being is not at all the accomplice of the totality, whether of the finite totality, (the violent totality of which Levinas speaks) or of an infinite totality. The notion of totality is always related to the existent. It is always a "metaphysical" or "theological" notion, and the notions of finite and infinite take on meaning in relation to it.⁷⁰ Foreign to the finite totality, or to the infinity of existents, *foreign* in the sense specified above, foreign without being another existent or another totality of existents, Being could not oppress or enclose the existent and its differences. If the glance of the other is to command me, as Levinas says, and is to command me to command, then I must be able to let be the other in his freedom as Other, and vice versa. But Being itself commands nothing or no one. As Being is not the lord of the existent, its priority (ontic metaphor) is not an *archia*. The best liberation from violence is a certain putting into question, which makes the search for an *archia* tremble. Only the thought of Being can do so, and not traditional "philosophy" or "metaphysics." The latter are therefore "politics" which can escape ethical violence only by economy: by battling violently against the violences of the *an-archy* whose possibility, in history, is still the accomplice of archism.

Just as he implicitly had to appeal to phenomenological self-evidences against phenomenology, Levinas must ceaselessly suppose and practice the thought of precomprehension of Being in his discourse, even when he directs it against "ontology." Otherwise, what would "exteriority as the essence of Being" mean (*TI*)? And that "eschatology places one in relation to Being, beyond the totality or history, and not with Being beyond past and present" (*TI*)? And "to support pluralism as the structure of Being" (*DL*)? And that "the encounter with the face is, absolutely, a relation to what is. Perhaps man alone is substance, and this is why he is face"?⁷¹ Ethico-metaphysical transcendence therefore presupposes ontological transcendence. The *epekeina tes ousias* (in Levinas's interpretation) would not lead beyond Being itself, but beyond the totality of the existent or the existent-hood of the existent (the Being existent of the existent), or beyond ontic history. Heidegger also

refers to the *epekeina tes ousias* in order to announce ontological transcendence,⁷² but he also shows that the undetermined *agathon* toward which transcendence breaks through has been determined too quickly.

Thus, the thought of Being could not possibly occur as ethical violence. On the contrary, without it one would be forbidden to let be the existent, and one would enclose transcendence within identification and empirical economy. By refusing, in *Totality and Infinity*, to accord any dignity to the onto-ontological difference, by seeing in it only a ruse of war, and by calling the intra-ontic movement of ethical transcendence (the movement respectful of one existent toward another) *metaphysics*, Levinas confirms Heidegger in his discourse: for does not the latter see in metaphysics (in metaphysical ontology) the forgetting of Being and the dissimulation of the onto-ontological difference? "Metaphysics does not pose the question of the truth of Being itself."⁷³ It thinks Being in an implicit fashion, as is inevitable in every language. This is why the thinking of Being must take its driving force from metaphysics, and must first occur as the metaphysics of metaphysics in the question "What is Metaphysics?" But the difference between the implicit and the explicit is the entirety of thought; and if correctly determined, it imprints its form on all ruptures and on the most radical questions. "It is true," says Heidegger once more, "that Metaphysics represents the existent in its Being, and thus thinks the Being of the existent. But it does not think the difference of Being and the existent."⁷⁴

For Heidegger, it is therefore metaphysics (or metaphysical ontology) which remains a closure of the totality, and transcends the existent only toward the (superior) existent, or toward the (finite or infinite) totality of the existent. This metaphysics essentially would be tied to a humanism which never asks itself "in what manner the essence of man belongs to the truth of Being."⁷⁵ "What is proper to all metaphysics is revealed in its 'humanism.'"⁷⁶ Now, Levinas simultaneously proposes to us a humanism and a metaphysics. It is a question of attaining, via the royal road of ethics, the supreme existent, the truly existent ("substance" and "in itself" are Levinas's expressions) as other. And this existent is man, determined as face in his essence as man on the basis of his resemblance to God. Is this not what Heidegger has in mind when he speaks of the unity of metaphysics, humanism and onto-theology? "The encounter with the face is not only an anthropological fact. It is, absolutely speaking, a relation with what is. Perhaps man alone is substance, and this is why he is face." Certainly. But it is the analogy between the face and God's visage that, in the most classical fashion, distinguishes man from animal, and determines man's substantiality: "The Other resembles God." Man's substantiality, which permits him to be face, is thus founded in his resemblance to God, who is therefore both The Face and absolute substantiality. The theme of the Face thus calls for a second reference to Descartes. Levinas never formulates it: it is, as recognized by the Schoolmen, the ambiguity of the notion of substance as concerns God

and his creatures (cf. for example, *Principes*, I, sec. 51). By means of more than one mediation we thus are referred to the Scholastic problem of the analogy. We do not intend to enter into it here.⁷⁷ Let us simply notice that conceived on the basis of a doctrine of analogy, of "resemblance," the expression "human face" is no longer, at bottom, as foreign to metaphor as Levinas seems to wish. "... The Other resembles God. ..." Is this not the original metaphor? The question of Being is nothing less than a disputation of the *metaphysical* truth of this schema; which, let us note in passing, "atheistic humanism" employs precisely in order to denounce the very process of alienation. The question of Being draws back into this schema, this opposition of humanisms, in the direction of the thought of Being presupposed by the determination of the existent-man, the existent-God, and the analogical relationship between them; for the possibility of this relationship can be opened solely by the pre-conceptual and pre-analogical unity of Being. It is a question neither of substituting Being for God, nor of founding God on Being. The Being of the existent (for example, God)⁷⁸ is not the absolute existent, nor the infinite existent, nor even the foundation of the existent in general. This is why the question of Being cannot budge the metaphysical edifice of *Totality and Infinity* (for example). It is simply forever out of reach for the "inversion of the terms" *ontology* and *metaphysics* that Levinas proposes. The theme of this inversion, therefore, does not play an indispensable role, have meaning and necessity, except in the economy and coherence of Levinas's book in its entirety.

What would it mean, for metaphysics and for humanism, to ask "in what manner the essence of man belongs to the truth of Being" (*Humanismus*)? Perhaps this: would the experience of the face be possible, could it be stated, if the thought of Being were not already implied in it? In effect, the face is the inaugural unity of a naked glance and of a right to speech. But eyes and mouth make a face only if, beyond need, they can "let be," if they see and they say what is such as it is, if they reach the Being of what is. But since Being is, it cannot simply be produced, but precisely must be respected by a glance and a speech; Being must provoke them, interpellate them. There is no speech without the thought and statement *of* Being. But as Being is nothing outside the determined existent, it would not appear as such without the possibility of speech. Being *itself* can only be thought and stated. It is the contemporary of the Logos, which itself can only be as the Logos *of* Being, *saying* Being. Without this double genitivity, speech, cut off from Being and enclosed in the determined existent, would be only (according to Levinas's terminology) the cry of need before desire, the gesture of the self in the realm of the homogenous. It is only then, in the reduction or subordination of thought to Being, that "philosophical discourse itself" would not be "only a failed act, the pretext for an uninterrupted psycho-analysis or philology or sociology in which the appearance of discourse vanishes into the All" (*TI*). It is only then that the relation to exteriority

would no longer catch its breath. The metaphysics of the face therefore *encloses* the thought of Being, presupposing the difference between Being and the existent at the same time as it stifles it.

If this difference is original, if to think Being outside the existent is to think *nothing*, or if it is to *think* nothing no more than it is to approach the existent other than in its Being, doubtless one has some right to say with Levinas (excepting the ambiguous expression "Being in general") that "the relation to the expressed existent *preexists* . . . the unveiling of Being in general . . . ; at the ontological plane, the ethical one" (*TI*; my italics). If preexistence has the ontic sense which it must have, then this is incontestable. In fact, in existence the relationship with the *expressed* existent precedes the unveiling, the explicit thinking, of Being itself. With the limitation that there is no *expression*, in the sense of speech and not of need, except if there is already, implicitly, thought of Being. Likewise, *in fact*, the natural attitude precedes the transcendental reduction. But we know that ontological or transcendental "priority" is not of this order, and no one has ever alleged that it was. This "priority" no more contradicts than it confirms ontic or factual precedence. It follows that Being, since it is always, in fact, determined as an existent and is nothing outside the existent, is always dissimulated. Levinas's phrase—the preexistence of the relation to the existent—is the very formula of this initial concealment. Being not existing before the Existent—and this is why it *is History*—it begins by hiding itself beneath its determination. This determination as the revelation of the existent (Metaphysics) is the very veiling of Being. There is nothing accidental or regrettable about this. "The unconcealing of the existent, the clarity accorded to it, darkens the light of Being. Being draws back in that it is disclosed in the existent" (*Holzwege* p. 310). Is it not risky, then, to speak of the thinking of Being as of a thought dominated by the theme of unveiling (*TI*)? Without this dissimulation of Being by the existent there would be nothing, and there would be no history. That Being occurs in all respects as history and as world means that it can only retire beneath ontic determinations in the history of metaphysics. For historical "epochs" are metaphysical (ontotheological) determinations of the Being which thus brackets itself, reserves itself beneath metaphysical concepts. In the strange light of this being-history Heidegger permits the reemergence of the notion of "eschatology," as it appears, for example, in *Holzwege*: "Being itself . . . is in itself eschatological" (p. 302). The relationship between this eschatology and messianic eschatology requires closer examination. The first supposes that war is not an accident which overcomes Being, but rather Being itself. "Das Sein selber das Strittige ist" (*Brief über den Humanismus*, p. 189). A proposition which must not be understood in consonance with Hegelianism: here, negativity has its origin neither in negation, nor in the anxiety of an infinite and primary existent. War, perhaps, is no longer even conceivable as negativity.

Heidegger, as is well known, calls the original dissimulation of Being beneath the existent, which is prior to the error in judgment, and which nothing precedes in the ontic order, erring [*Irren*: erring, going astray]: "Every epoch of world history is an epoch of erring" (*Holzwege* p. 311). If Being is time and history, then erring and the epochal essence of Being are irreducible. Henceforth, how can one accuse this thought of interminable wandering of being a new paganism of the Site, a complacent cult of the Sendentary? (*TI*, *DL*).⁷⁹ Here, the solicitation of the Site and the Land is in no way, it must be emphasized, a passionate attachment to territory or locality, is in no way a provincialism or particularism. It is, at very least, as little linked to empirical "nationalism" as is, or should be, the Hebraic nostalgia for the Land, a nostalgia *provoked* not by an empirical passion, but by the irruption of a speech or a promise.⁸⁰ Is not to interpret the Heideggerean theme of the Land or the Dwelling as a nationalism or a Barrèsism first of all to express an *allergy*—the word, the accusation, which Levinas plays upon so often—to the "climate" of Heidegger's philosophy? Levinas acknowledges, moreover, that his "reflections," after having submitted to inspiration by "the philosophy of Martin Heidegger," "are governed by a profound need to depart from the climate of this philosophy" (*EE*). In question here is a need whose natural legitimacy we would be the last to question; what is more, we believe that its climate is never totally exterior to thought itself. But does not the naked truth of the other appear beyond "need," "climate," and a certain "history"? And who has taught us this better than Levinas?

The Site, therefore, is not an empirical Here but always an *Illic*: for Heidegger, as for the Jew and the Poet. The proximity of the Site is always held in reserve, says Hölderlin as commented on by Heidegger.⁸¹ The thinking of Being thus is not a pagan cult of the *Site*, because the Site is never a given proximity but a promised one. And then also because it is not a *pagan cult*. The Sacred of which it speaks *belongs* neither to religion in general, nor to a particular theology, and thus cannot be determined by any history of religion. It is first the essential experience of divinity or of deity. As the latter is neither a concept nor a reality, it must provide access to itself in a proximity foreign to mystical theory or affectivity, foreign to theology and to enthusiasm. Again, in a sense which is neither chronological nor logical, nor ontical in general, it *precedes* every relationship to God or to the Gods. This last relationship, of whatever type, in order to be lived and stated supposes some precomprehension of the Deity, of God's Being-god, of the "dimension of the divine" of which Levinas also speaks by saying that it "is opened on the basis of the human face" (*TI*). This is all, and as usual it is simple and difficult. The sacred is the "only essential space of divinity which in turn opens only a dimension for the gods and the god . . ." (*Humanism*). This space (in which Heidegger also names Elevation)⁸² is within faith and atheism. Both presuppose it. "It is only on the basis of the truth of Being that the essence of the Sacred can be thought. It is only on the basis

of the essence of the Sacred that the essence of Divinity must be thought. It is only in the light of the essence of Divinity that one can think and say what the word 'God' must designate" (*Humanismus*). This precomprehension of the Divine cannot not be presupposed by Levinas's discourse at the very moment when he seeks to oppose God to the Sacred divine. That the gods or God cannot be indicated except in the Space of the Sacred and in the light of the deity, is at once the *limit* and the *wellspring* of finite-Being as history. Limit, because divinity is *not* God. In a sense it is nothing. "The sacred, it is true, appears. But the god remains distant."⁸³ Wellspring, because this anticipation as a thought of Being (of the existent God) always *sees* God *coming*, opens the possibility (the eventuality) of an encounter with God and of a dialogue with God.⁸⁴

That the Deity of God, which permits the thinking and naming of God, is nothing, and above all is not God himself, is what Meister Eckhart, in particular, said this way: "God and the deity are as different from one another as heaven and earth. . . . God operates, deity does not operate, has nothing to operate, has no operation in it, has never any operation in view" (Sermon *Nolite timere eos*). But this deity is still determined as the essence-of-the-threefold-God. And when Meister Eckhart seeks to go beyond these determinations, the movement which he sketches seems to remain enclosed in ontic transcendence. "When I said that God was not a Being and was above Being, I did not thereby contest his Being, but on the contrary attributed to him a *more elevated Being*" (*Quasi stella matutina . . .*). This negative theology is still a theology and, *in its literality at least*, it is concerned with liberating and acknowledging the ineffable transcendence of an infinite existent, "Being above Being and superessential negation." *In its literality at least*, but the difference between metaphysical ontotheology, on the one hand, and the thought of Being (of difference), on the other, signifies the essential importance of the *letter*. Since everything occurs in movements of increasing explicitness, the literal difference is almost the entire difference of thought. This is why, here, when the thought of Being goes beyond ontic determinations it is not a negative theology, nor even a negative ontology.

"Ontological" anticipation, transcendence toward Being, permits, then, an understanding of the word God, for example, even if this understanding is but the ether in which dissonance can resonate. This transcendence inhabits and founds language, and along with it the possibility of all Being-together; the possibility of a *Mitsein* much more original than any of the eventual forms with which it has often been confused: solidarity, the team, companionship.⁸⁵ Implied by the discourse of *Totality and Infinity*, alone permitting to *let* be others in their truth, freeing dialogue and the face to face, the thought of Being is thus as close as possible to nonviolence.

We do not say pure nonviolence. Like pure violence, pure nonviolence is a contradictory concept. Contradictory beyond what Levinas calls "formal logic." Pure violence, a relationship between beings without face, is not yet

violence, is pure nonviolence. And inversely: pure nonviolence, the non-relation of the same to the other (in the sense understood by Levinas) is pure violence. Only a face can arrest violence, but can do so, in the first place, only because a face can provoke it. Levinas says it well: "Violence can only aim at the face" ("La violence ne peut viser qu'un visage" *TI*). Further, without the thought of Being which opens the face, there would be only pure violence or pure nonviolence. Therefore, the thought of Being, in its unveiling, is never foreign to a certain violence.⁸⁶ That this thought always appears in difference, and that the same—thought (and) (of) Being—is never the identical, means first that Being is history, that Being dissimulates itself in its occurrence, and originally does violence to itself in order to be stated and in order to appear. A Being without violence would be a Being which would occur outside the existent: nothing; nonhistory; nonoccurrence; nonphenomenality. A speech produced without the least violence would determine nothing, would say nothing, would offer nothing to the other; it would not be *history*, and it would *show* nothing: in every sense of the word, and first of all the Greek sense, it would be speech without *phrase*.

In the last analysis, according to Levinas, nonviolent language would be a language which would do without the verb *to be*, that is, without predication. Predication is the first violence. Since the verb *to be* and the predicative act are implied in every other verb, and in every common noun, nonviolent language, in the last analysis, would be a language of pure invocation, pure adoration, proffering only proper nouns in order to call to the other from afar. In effect, such a language would be purified of all *rhetoric*, which is what Levinas explicitly desires; and purified of the first sense of rhetoric, which we can invoke without artifice, that is, purified of every *verb*. Would such a language still deserve its name? Is a language free from all rhetoric possible? The Greeks, who taught us what *Logos* meant, would never have accepted this. Plato tells us in the *Cratylus* (425a), the *Sophist* (262 ad) and in Letter VII (342b), that there is no *Logos* which does not suppose the interlacing of nouns and verbs.

Finally, if one remains within Levinas's intentions, what would a language without phrase, a language which would say nothing, offer to the other? Language must give the world to the other, *Totality and Infinity* tells us. A master who forbids himself the *phrase* would give nothing. He would have no disciples but only slaves. The work—or liturgy—that is the expenditure which breaks with economy, and which must not be thought, according to Levinas, as a Game, would be forbidden to him.

Thus, in its most elevated nonviolent urgency, denouncing the passage through Being and the moment of the concept, Levinas's thought would not only propose an ethics without law, as we said above, but also a language without phrase. Which would be entirely coherent if the face was only glance, but it is also speech; and in speech it is the phrase which makes the cry of need become the expression of desire. Now, there is no phrase which is

indeterminate, that is, which does not pass through the violence of the concept. Violence appears with *articulation*. And the latter is opened only by (the at first preconceptual) circulation of Being. The very elocution of non-violent metaphysics is its first disavowal. Levinas doubtless would not deny that every historical language carries within it an irreducible conceptual moment, and therefore a certain violence. From his point of view, the origin and possibility of the concept are simply not the thought of Being, but the gift of the world to the other as totally-other (cf., for example, *TI*, p. 175). In its original possibility as *offer*, in its still silent intention, language is nonviolent (but can it be language, in this pure intention?). It becomes violent only in its history, in what we have called the phrase, which obliges it to *articulate itself* in a conceptual syntax opening the circulation of the same, permitting itself to be governed both by "ontology" and by what remains, for Levinas, the concept of concepts: Being. Now, for Levinas, the concept of Being would be only an abstract means produced for the gift of the world to the other who is *above Being*. Hence, only in its silent origin, before Being, would language be nonviolent. But why history? Why does the phrase impose itself? Because if one does not uproot the silent origin from itself violently, if one decides not to speak, then the worst violence will silently cohabit the *idea* of peace? Peace is made only in a *certain silence*, which is determined and protected by the violence of speech. Since speech says nothing other than the horizon of this silent peace by which it has itself summoned and that it is its mission to protect and to prepare, speech *indefinitely* remains silent. One never escapes the *economy of war*.

It is evident that to separate the original possibility of speech—as non-violence and gift—from the violence necessary in historical actuality is to prop up thought by means of transhistoricity. Which Levinas does explicitly, despite his initial critique of Husserlian "ahistoricism." For Levinas, the origin of meaning is nonhistory, is "beyond history." One would then have to ask whether it is any longer possible to identify thought and language as Levinas seeks to do; and one would have to ask whether this transhistoricity of meaning is authentically Hebraic in its inspiration; and finally, whether this nonhistory uproots itself from history in general, or only from a certain empirical or ontic dimension of history. And whether the eschatology invoked can be separated from every reference to history. *For our own reference to history, here, is only contextual. The economy of which we are speaking does not any longer accommodate the concept of history such as it has always functioned, and which it is difficult, if not impossible, to lift from its teleological or eschatological horizon.*

The ahistoricity of meaning at its origin is what profoundly separates Levinas from Heidegger, therefore. Since Being is history for the latter, it *is not* outside difference, and thus, it originally occurs as (nonethical) violence, as dissimulation of itself in its own unveiling. That language, thereby, always hides its own origin is not a contradiction, but history itself. In the

ontological-historical⁸⁷ violence which permits the thinking of ethical violence, in economy as the thought of Being, Being is necessarily dissimulated. The first violence is this dissimulation, but it is also the first defeat of nihilistic violence, and the first epiphany of Being. Being, thus, is less the *primum cognitum*, as was said, than the *first dissimulated*, and these two propositions are not contradictory. For Levinas, on the contrary, Being (understood as concept) is the *first dissimulating*, and the ontico-ontological difference thereby would neutralize difference, the infinite alterity of the totally-other. The ontico-ontological difference, moreover, would be conceivable only on the basis of the idea of the Infinite, of the unanticipatable irruption of the totally-other existent. For Levinas, as for Heidegger, language would be at once a coming forth and a holding back [*résérve*], enlightenment and obscurity; and for both, dissimulation would be a conceptual gesture. But for Levinas, the concept is on the plane of Being; for Heidegger it is on the plane of ontic determination.

This schema accentuates their opposition but, as is often the case, also permits one to conjecture about their proximity: the proximity of two "eschatologies" which by opposed routes repeat and put into question the entire "philosophical" adventure issued from Platonism. Interrogate it simultaneously from within and without, in the form of a question to Hegel, in whom this adventure is thought and recapitulated. This proximity would be indicated in questions of this type: *on the one hand*, is God (the infinite-other-existent) still an existent which can be precomprehended on the basis of a thought of Being (singularly, of divinity)? In other words, can infinity be called an ontic determination? Has not God always been thought of as the name of that which is not a supreme existent precomprehended on the basis of a thought of Being? Is not God the name of that which cannot be anticipated on the basis of the dimension of the divine? Is not God the other name of Being (name because nonconcept), the thinking of which would open difference and the ontological horizon, instead of being indicated in them only? Opening of the horizon, and not *in* the horizon. Through the thought of infinity, the ontic enclosure would have already been broken—but in a sense of the unthought that would have to be examined more closely—by means of what Heidegger calls metaphysics and onto-theology. *On the other hand*: is not the thought of Being the thought of the other before being the homogeneous identity of the concept, and the asphyxiation of the same? Is not the beyond-history of eschatology the other name of the transition to a more profound history, to History itself? But to a history which, unable any longer to be *itself* in any original or final presence, would have to change its name?

In other words, perhaps one might say that ontology precedes theology *only* by putting between brackets the content of the ontic determination which, in post-Hellenic philosophical thought, is called God: to wit, the positive infinity. The positive infinity would only have the (nominal)

appearance of what is called an ontic determination. In truth, it would be that which refuses to be an ontic determination which is included as such in the thought of Being, that is, on the basis and in the light of a thought of Being. On the contrary, it is infinity—as nondetermination and concrete operation—which would permit the thinking of the difference between Being and ontic determination. The ontic content of infinity would destroy ontic closure. Implicitly or not, the thought of infinity would open the question, and the ontico-ontological difference. Paradoxically, it would be this thought of infinity (what is called the thought of God) which would permit one to affirm the priority of ontology over theology, and to affirm that the thought of Being is presupposed by the thought of God. Doubtless, it is for this reason that Duns Scotus or Malebranche, respectful of the presence in all thought of *uniform* Being, or Being in general, did not believe it necessary to distinguish between the levels of ontology (or metaphysics) and theology. Heidegger often reminds us of the “strange simplicity” of the thought of Being: this is both its difficulty and that which properly touches upon the “unknowable.” For Heidegger, infinity would be only one eventual determination of this simplicity. For Malebranche, infinity is its very form: “The idea of the extended infinite thus encloses more reality than that of the heavens; and the idea of the infinite in all genres of Being, that which corresponds to this word, *Being*, the infinitely perfect being, contains infinitely more [reality], although the perception with which this idea affects us is the slightest of all; and is slighter to the extent that it is more vast, and consequently infinitely slight because infinite” (*Entretien d'un philosophe chrétien avec un philosophe chinois*.) Since Being is nothing (determined), it is necessarily produced in difference (*as* difference). Is, on the one hand, to say that Being is infinite, or to say, on the other, that it is revealed as produced only “in simultaneity with” (*in eins mit*) Nothingness (*What Is Metaphysics?*)—which means that it is “finite in its essence” (*ibid.*)—fundamentally to say anything else? But one would have to show that Heidegger never meant “anything else” than classical metaphysics, and that the transgression of metaphysics is not a new metaphysical or onto-theological thesis. Thus, the question about the Being of the existent would not only introduce—among others—the question about the existent-God; it already *would suppose* God as the very possibility of its question, and as the answer within its question. God always would be implied in every question about God, and would precede every “method.” The very content of the thought of God is that of a being *about* which no question could be asked (except by being asked by it), and which cannot be determined as an existent. *The Idiot (Idiota)*, an admirable meditation by Nicholas of Cusa, develops this implication of God in every question, and first in the question of God. For example:

The Idiot: See how easie the difficultie is in divine things, that it always offers it self to the seeker, in the same manner that it is sought for. *The*

Orator: Without doubt, there is nothing more wonderfull. *Id*: Every question concerning God presupposeth the thing questioned; and that must be answered, which in every question concerning God, the question presupposeth: for God, although he be unsignifiable, is signified in every signification of terms. *Or*: Declare thy self more at large. . . . *Id*: Doth not the question, whether a thing be or no, presuppose the Entitie? *Or*: Yes. *Id*: Therefore when it is demanded of thee, whether God be, (or whether there be a God?) answer that which is presupposed, namely that he is; because that is the Entitie presupposed in the question. So, if any man shall ask thee, what is God? considering that this question presupposeth a quidditie to be; thou shalt answer, that God is absolute quiddity itself. And so for all things. Nor need there be any hesitation or doubt in this; for God is the absolute presupposition itself, of all things, which (after what manner soever) are presupposed as in every effect the cause is presupposed. See therefore, Oratour, how easie Theologicall difficulty is. . . . If that which in every question is presupposed, be in divine matters an answer unto the question, then of God there can be no proper question, because the answer coincides with it.⁸⁸

By making the origin of language, meaning, and difference the relation to the infinitely other, Levinas is resigned to betraying his own intentions in his philosophical discourse. The latter is understood, and instructs, only by first permitting the same and Being to circulate within it. A classical schema here complicated by a metaphysics of dialogue and instruction, of a demonstration which contradicts what is demonstrated by the very rigor and truth of its development. The thousand-times-denounced circle of historicism, psychologism, relativism, etc. But the true name of this inclination of thought to the Other, of this resigned acceptance of incoherent incoherence inspired by a truth more profound than the "logic" of philosophical discourse, the true name of this renunciation of the concept, of the a priori and transcendental horizons of language, is *empiricism*. For the latter, at bottom, has ever committed but one fault: the fault of presenting itself as a philosophy. And the profundity of the empiricist intention must be recognized beneath the naïveté of certain of its historical expressions. It is the *dream* of a purely *heterological* thought at its source. A *pure* thought of *pure* difference. Empiricism is its philosophical name, its metaphysical pretention or modesty. We say the *dream* because it must vanish *at daybreak*, as soon as language awakens. But perhaps one will object that it is language which is sleeping. Doubtless, but then one must, in a certain way, become classical once more, and again find other grounds for the divorce between speech and thought. This route is quite, perhaps too, abandoned today. Among others, by Levinas.

By radicalizing the theme of the infinite exteriority of the other, Levinas thereby assumes the aim which has more or less secretly animated all the

philosophical gestures which have been called *empiricisms* in the history of philosophy. He does so with an audacity, a profundity, and a resoluteness never before attained. By taking this project to its end, he totally renews empiricism, and inverts it by revealing it to itself as metaphysics. Despite the Husserlian and Heideggerean stages of his thought, Levinas does not even seek to draw back from the word *empiricism*. On two occasions, at least, he speaks for "the radical empiricism confident in the instruction of exteriority" (*TI*). The experience of the other (of the infinite) is irreducible, and is therefore "the experience par excellence" (*TI*). And, concerning death which is indeed its irreducible resource, Levinas speaks of an "empiricism which is in no way a positivism."⁸⁹ But can one speak of an *experience* of the other or of difference? Has not the concept of experience always been determined by the metaphysics of presence? Is not experience always an encountering of an irreducible presence, the perception of a phenomenality?

This complicity between empiricism and metaphysics is in no way surprising. By criticizing them, or rather by limiting them with one and the same gesture, Kant and Husserl indeed had recognized their solidarity. It calls for closer meditation. Schelling went quite far in this direction.⁹⁰

But empiricism always has been determined by philosophy, from Plato to Husserl, as *nonphilosophy*: as the philosophical pretention to nonphilosophy, the inability to justify oneself, to come to one's own aid as speech. But this incapacitation, when resolutely assumed, contests the resolution and coherence of the logos (philosophy) at its root, instead of letting itself be questioned by the logos. Therefore, nothing can so profoundly *solicit* the Greek logos—philosophy—than this irruption of the totally-other; and nothing can to such an extent reawaken the logos to its origin as to its mortality, its other.

But if one calls this experience of the infinitely other Judaism (which is only a hypothesis for us), one must reflect upon the necessity in which this experience finds itself, the injunction by which it is ordered to occur as logos, and to reawaken the Greek in the autistic syntax of his own dream. The necessity to avoid the worst violence, which threatens when one silently delivers oneself into the hands of the other in the night. The necessity to borrow the ways of the unique philosophical logos, which can only invert the "curvature of space" for the benefit of the same. A same which is not the identical, and which does not enclose the other. It was a Greek who said, "If one has to philosophize, one has to philosophize; if one does not have to philosophize, one still has to philosophize (to say it and think it). One always has to philosophize." Levinas knows this better than others: "One could not possibly reject the Scriptures without knowing how to read them, nor say philology without philosophy, nor, if need be, arrest philosophical discourse without philosophizing" (*DL*). "One must refer—I am convinced—to the medium of all comprehension and of all understanding in which all truth is reflected—precisely to Greek civilization, and to what it produced: to the logos, to the coherent discourse of reason, to life in a

reasonable State. This is the true grounds of all understanding" (*DL*). Such a site of encounter cannot only offer *occasional* hospitality to a thought which would remain foreign to it. And still less may the Greek absent himself, having loaned his house and his language, while the Jew and the Christian meet in his home (for this is the encounter in question in the text just cited). Greece is not a neutral, provisional territory, beyond borders. The history in which the Greek logos is produced cannot be a happy accident providing grounds for understanding to those who understand eschatological prophecy, and to those who do not understand it at all. It cannot be *outside* and *accidental* for any thought. The Greek miracle is not this or that, such and such astonishing success; it is the impossibility for any thought ever to treat its sages as "sages of the outside," according to the expression of Saint John Chrysostom. In having proffered the *epekeina tes ousias*, in having recognized from its second word (for example, in the *Sophist*) that alterity had to circulate at the origin of meaning, in welcoming alterity in general into the heart of the logos, the Greek thought of Being forever has protected itself against every absolutely *surprising* convocation.

Are we Jews? Are we Greeks? We live in the difference between the Jew and the Greek, which is perhaps the unity of what is called history. We live in and of difference, that is, in *hypocrisy*, about which Levinas so profoundly says that it is "not only a base contingent defect of man, but the underlying rending of a world attached to both the philosophers and the prophets" (*TI*, p. 24).

Are we Greeks? Are we Jews? But who, we? Are we (not a chronological, but a pre-logical question) *first* Jews or *first* Greeks? And does the strange dialogue between the Jew and the Greek, peace itself, have the form of the absolute, speculative logic of Hegel, the living logic which *reconciles* formal tautology and empirical heterology⁹¹ after having *thought* prophetic discourse in the preface to the *Phenomenology of the Mind*? Or, on the contrary, does this peace have the form of infinite separation and of the unthinkable, unsayable transcendence of the other? To what horizon of peace does the language which asks this question belong? From whence does it draw the energy of its question? Can it account for the historical *coupling* of Judaism and Hellenism? And what is the legitimacy, what is the meaning of the *copula* in this proposition from perhaps the most Hegelian of modern novelists: "Jewgreek is greekjew. Extremes meet"?⁹²

Notes

- 1 Emmanuel Levinas, *Théorie de l'intuition dans la phénoménologie de Husserl* (1st ed., Paris: Alcan, 1930; 2d ed., Vrin, 1963); *De l'existence à l'existant* (Fontaine, 1947); *Le temps et l'autre*, in *Le Choix, le Monde, l'Existence*, Cahiers du Collège philosophique (Arthaud, 1949); *En découvrant l'existence, avec Husserl et Heidegger* (Vrin, 1949); *Totalité et infini, Essai sur l'extériorité* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1961); *Difficile liberté, Essais sur le judaïsme* (Albin Michel, 1963).

I shall also refer to several articles which I shall mention at the proper moment. The principal works will be designated by the initials of their titles: *Théorie de l'intuition* . . . : *THI*; *De l'existence à l'existant*: *EE*; *Le temps et l'autre*: *TA*; *En découvrant l'existence*: *EDE*; *Totalité et infini*: *TI* [see below]; *Difficile liberté*: *DL*.

This essay was already written when two important texts by Emmanuel Levinas appeared: "La trace de l'autre", in *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie*, September 1963; and "La signification et le sens," *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*, 1964, no. 2. Unfortunately we can make but brief allusions to these texts here. [The major work referred to in this essay has appeared in English: *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969). All page references to *TI* are to Lingis's translation.]

- 2 TN. On the double genitive cf. above, chap. 3, note 11.
- 3 After desiring to restore the properly ontological intention dormant within metaphysics, after having reawakened the "fundamental ontology" beneath "metaphysical ontology," Heidegger, faced by the tenacity of traditional ambiguity, finally proposes to abandon the terms "ontology" and "ontological" (*Introduction to Metaphysics*). The question of Being cannot be submitted to an ontology.
- 4 That is, to relativism: the truth of philosophy does not depend upon its relation to the actuality of the Greek or European event. On the contrary, we must gain access to the Greek or European *eidōs* through an irruption or a call whose point of departure is variously determined by Husserl and Heidegger. It remains that, for both, "the irruption of philosophy" ("Aufbruch oder Einbruch der Philosophie," Husserl, *Krisis* . . .) is the "original" phenomenon "which characterizes Europe as a 'spiritual figure' (ibid.). For both, the "word *philosophia* tells us that philosophy is something which, first of all, determines the existence of the Greek world. Not only that—*philosophia* also determines the innermost basic feature of our Western-European history, the often heard expression 'Western-European philosophy' is, in truth, a tautology. Why? Because philosophy is Greek in its nature; Greek, in this instance, means that in origin the nature of philosophy is of such a kind that it first appropriated the Greek world, and only it, in order to unfold." Heidegger, *What Is Philosophy?*, trans. William Kluback and Jean T. Wilde (London: Vision Press, 1958), pp. 29–31.
- 5 Husserl: "Reason does not suffer being distinguished into 'theoretical,' 'practical,' or 'esthetic,' etc." (*Vérité et liberté*, trans. P. Ricoeur). Heidegger: "Terms such as 'logic,' 'ethics,' 'physics,' appear only at the moment when original thinking loses its hold" (*Brief über den "Humanismus,"* in *Wegmarken* [Frankfurt, 1967], p. 147).
- 6 TN. Lingis's note, *TI*, p. 24: "With the author's permission, we are translating 'autrui' (the personal Other, the you) by 'Other,' and 'autre' by 'other.' In doing so, we regrettably sacrifice the possibility of reproducing the author's use of capital or small letters with both these terms in the French text." I have followed Lingis's practice throughout this text.
- 7 Partial not only due to the point of view chosen, the amplitude of the works, the material and other limits of this essay. But also because Levinas's writing, which would merit an entire separate study itself, and in which stylistic gestures (especially in *Totality and Infinity*) can less than ever be distinguished from intention, forbids the prosaic disembodiment into conceptual frameworks that is the first violence of all commentary. Certainly, Levinas recommends the good usage of prose which breaks Dionysiac charm or violence, and forbids poetic rapture, but to no avail: in *Totality and Infinity* the use of metaphor, remaining admirable and

most often—if not always—beyond rhetorical abuse, shelters within its pathos the most decisive movements of the discourse.

By too often omitting to reproduce these metaphors in our disenchanted prose, are we faithful or unfaithful? Further, in *Totality and Infinity* the thematic development is neither purely descriptive nor purely deductive. It proceeds with the infinite insistence of waves on a beach: return and repetition, always, of the same wave against the same shore, in which, however, as each return recapitulates itself, it also infinitely renews and enriches itself. Because of all these challenges to the commentator and the critic, *Totality and Infinity* is a work of art and not a treatise.

- 8 At the end of *Difficile liberté*, under the title "Signature," will be found the references for a philosophical biography of Levinas.
- 9 TN. The reference is to Hegel.
- 10 TN. "Glance" is the translation of *le regard*. Here, Derrida is playing on the visual metaphors in the Greek derivations of theory (from *theorein*: to look at, behold) and phenomenon (from *phainesthai*: to appear).
- 11 Cf. "La technique phénoménologique," in *Husserl: Cahiers de Royaumont*, and "Intentionnalité et métaphysique," *Revue philosophique*, 1959.
- 12 The other ancestor, the Latin one, will be Cartesian: the idea of Infinity announcing itself to thought as that which always overflows it. We have just named the only two philosophical gestures—their authors aside—totally acquitted, judged innocent by Levinas. Except for these two anticipations, tradition would only have known, under the name of infinity, the "false infinity" incapable of absolutely overflowing the Same: the infinite as indefinite horizon, or as the transcendence of the totality over its parts.
- 13 Cf. the philosophical and poetic examples given by Bachelard in *La terre et les rêveries du repos*, pp. 22ff.
- 14 This schema always regulates Levinas's relations to Husserl. Theoretism and objectivism would be its conclusion, the Husserlian letter betraying the spirit of intentional analysis and of phenomenology. Cf., for example, *Intentionnalité et métaphysique*: "The great contribution of Husserlian phenomenology is in the idea that intentionality, or the relation to alterity, is not frozen by polarization into subject-object. Certainly the manner in which Husserl himself interprets this overflowing of objectifying intentionality by transcendental intentionality consists in reducing the former to other intuitions and as if to 'little perceptions.'" (Would Husserl have subscribed to this interpretation of his "interpretation?" We are not at all sure, but this is not the place for such a question.) There follows a description of the preobjective sphere of an intentional experience absolutely departing from itself toward the other (a description, however, which has never seemed to us to exceed a certain Husserlian literality.) Same schema in *Totality and Infinity*: Husserl's "essential teaching" is opposed to its "letter": "What does it matter if in the Husserlian phenomenology taken literally these unsuspected horizons are in their turn interpreted as thoughts aiming at objects?" (*TI*, p. 28).
- 15 A proposition that Husserl doubtless would not have accepted easily. Similarly, does the entire analysis devoted to the doxical thesis and to paragraph 117 of *Ideas (Theory of Intuition*, p. 192) take into account the extraordinary enlargement of the notions of *thesis* and *doxa* effected by Husserl, who is already showing such care in respecting the originality of the practical, the axiological, and the aesthetic? As for the meaning of the reduction, it is true that in 1930, and in his published works, Husserl had not yet made it into a theme. We will come back to this. For the moment we are not interested in Husserlian truth, but in Levinas's itinerary.

- 16 As concerns representation, an important motif in the divergence, as concerns its dignity and status in Husserlian phenomenology, Levinas, however, never seems to have stopped hesitating. But again, almost always, it is a hesitation between the spirit and the letter. Sometimes too between law and fact. This movement can be followed through the following passages: *THI*, pp. 90ff.; *EDE*, pp. 22–23, esp. p. 52; *La technique phénoménologique*, pp. 98–99; *TI*, pp. 95ff.
- 17 In *EDE*, at a time (1940–49) when the surprises in this area were no longer held in store, the theme of this criticism still will be central: “In Husserl the phenomenon of meaning has never been determined by history.” (We do not mean to say, here, that this sentence is *finally* in contradiction with Husserl’s then known intentions. But are not the latter, whatever the definitive heart of the matter, already more problematical than Levinas seems to believe?)
- 18 TN. The reference is to the structure of *Being-with* analyzed in *Being and Time*.
- 19 TN. Although, as noted in the introduction above, I have attempted to keep to the practice of translating *Sein* by “Being,” and *Seiendes* by “being,” I shall most often use “existent” for “being” (*Seiendes, étant*) throughout this essay in order to have my vocabulary conform to Levinas’s. “Existent” has been maintained in the English translation of *Totality and Infinity*.
- 20 Hegel himself would not escape the rule. Contradiction would be ceaselessly, and at the end of ends, surmounted. Extreme audacity here would be to turn the accusation of formalism against Hegel, and to denounce speculative reflection as a logic of understanding, as tautological. One can imagine the difficulty of the task.
- 21 Another discomfort: Levinas never simply condemns technology. It can rescue from a worse violence, the “reactionary” violence of sacred ravishment, of taking root, of the natural proximity of landscape. “Technology takes us out of the Heideggerean world and the superstitious of Place.” It offers the chance “to let the human face shine in its nudity” (*DL*). We will return to this. Here, we only wish to foreshadow that *within history*—but is it meaningful elsewhere?—every philosophy of nonviolence can only choose the lesser violence within an *economy of violence*.
- 22 TN. The reference is to the dialectic of the master and the slave in *The Phenomenology of the Mind*: the master enjoys and consumes the product of the slave’s work. The slave defers this enjoyment in the experience of work and therefore, according to Hegel, negates reality in a more abstract, speculative fashion. The slave, thus, is the truth of the master. Cf. chap. 9, “From Restricted to General Economy.”
- 23 TN. In Hegel’s *Phenomenology* the model of the unhappy, split consciousness is Abraham, forced to choose between God’s command to sacrifice his son Isaac and his love for Isaac. Cf. also the remarks at the beginning of “*Cogito* and the History of Madness,” chap. 2 above.
- 24 “Liberté et commandement,” *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*, 1933.
- 25 Among the numerous passages denouncing the impotence of so-called “formal logic” when confronted with naked experience, let us point out in particular *TI*, pp. 194, 260, 276, where the description of fecundity must acknowledge “a duality of the Identical.” (One in two, one in three . . . Had not the Greek Logos already survived tremors of this nature? Had it not, rather, welcomed them?)
- 26 An affirmation at once profoundly faithful to Kant (“Respect is applied only to persons”—*Practical Reason*) and implicitly anti-Kantian, for without the formal element of universality, without the pure order of the law, respect for the other, respect and the other no longer escape empirical and pathological immediacy. Nevertheless, how do they escape according to Levinas? It is perhaps to be regretted that no systematic and patient confrontation has been organized with

- Kant in particular. To our knowledge, only an allusion is made to the "Kantian echos," and "to Kant's practical philosophy to which we feel particularly close,"—and this barely in passing—in one article ("L'ontologie est-elle fondamentale?" *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 1951; reprinted in *Phénoménologie, Existence*.) This confrontation is called for not only because of the ethical themes but also because of the difference between totality and infinity, about which Kant, among others and perhaps more than others, had a number of thoughts.
- 27 Levinas often makes accusations against the Socratic mastery which teaches nothing, teaches only the already known, and makes everything arise from the self, that is from the Ego, or from the Same as Memory. Anamnesis too, would be a procession of the Same. On this point, at least, Levinas cannot oppose himself to Kierkegaard (cf., for example, J. Wahl, *Etudes Kierkegaardiennes*, pp. 308–9), for his critique of Platonism here is literally Kierkegaardian. It is true that Kierkegaard opposed Socrates to Plato each time that reminiscence was in question. The latter would belong to the Platonic "speculation" from which Socrates "separates" himself (*Post scriptum*).
 - 28 G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of Fine Art*, trans. F. P. B. Osmaston (London: C. Bell and Sons, 1920) 1:206–7.
 - 29 *Ibid.*, 3:15.
 - 30 *Ibid.*
 - 31 *Ibid.*, p. 341.
 - 32 "A priori et subjectivité," *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*, 1962.
 - 33 Ludwig Feuerbach, *Kleine philosophische Schriften* (Leipzig 1950), p. 191.
 - 34 M. de Gondillac, *Introduction aux oeuvres choisies de Nicolas de Cues*, p. 35.
 - 35 *Nouvelle revue française*, December 1961, "Connaissance de l'inconnu."
 - 36 It is true that for Merleau-Ponty—differing from Levinas—the phenomenon of alterity was primordially, if not exclusively, that of the movement of temporalization.
 - 37 While defending himself against "the ridiculous pretension of 'correcting' Buber" (*TT*), Levinas, in substance, reproaches the I-Thou relationship (1) for being reciprocal and symmetrical, thus committing violence against height, and especially against separateness, and secretiveness; (2) for being formal, capable of "uniting man to things, as much as Man to man" (*TT*); (3) for preferring preference, the "private relationship," the "clandestine nature" of the couple which is "self-sufficient and forgetful of the universe" (*TT*). For there is also in Levinas's thought, despite his protests against neutrality, a summoning of the third party, the universal witness, the face of the world which keeps us from the "disdainful spiritualism" of the I-Thou. Others will determine, perhaps, whether Buber would recognize himself in this interpretation. It can already be noted in passing that Buber seems to have foreseen these reservations. Did he not specify that the I-Thou relationship was neither referential nor exclusive in that it is previous to all empirical and eventual modifications? Founded by the absolute I-Thou, which turns us toward God, it opens up, on the contrary, the possibility of every relationship to Others. Understood in its original authenticity, it is neither detour nor diversion. Like many of the contradictions which have been used to embarrass Buber, this one yields, as the *Postscript to I-Thou* tells us, "to a superior level of judgment" and to "the paradoxical description of God as the absolute Person. . . . It is as the absolute Person that God enters into a direct relation with us. . . . The man who turns to him therefore need not turn away from any other I-Thou relation; but he properly brings them to him, and lets them be fulfilled 'in the face of God'" (*I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith, New York: Scribner's, 1958).

- 38 On the theme of the height of God in its relation to the prone position of child or man (for example, on his sick bed or deathbed), on the relations between the *clinic* and *theology*, cf., for example, Feuerbach (see note 33 above), p. 233.
- 39 Here we ought to examine Malebranche too grappling with the problem of light and of the face of God (cf. especially 10th *Eclaircissement*).
- 40 We will not go beyond this schema. It would be useless to attempt, here, to enter into the descriptions devoted to interiority, economy, enjoyment, habitation, femininity, Eros, to everything suggested under the title *Beyond the Face*, matters that would doubtless deserve many questions. These analyses are not only an indefatigable and interminable destruction of "formal logic" they are so acute and so free as concerns traditional conceptuality, that a commentary running several pages would betray them immeasurably. Let it suffice to state that they depend upon the conceptual matrix we have just outlined, without being deduced from it but ceaselessly regenerating it.
- 41 On these decisive themes of identity, ipseity and equality, and to confront Hegel and Levinas, cf. notably Jean Hyppolite, *Genèse et structure de la phénoménologie de l'esprit*, 1:147ff.; and Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*.
- 42 Here we are thinking of the distinction between discourse and violence particularly common to Levinas and to Eric Weil. It does not have the same meaning for both. Levinas notes this in passing and, while paying homage to Weil for his "systematic and vigorous use of the term violence in its opposition to discourse," claims to give "different meaning" to this distinction (*DL*). We would be tempted to give a diametrically opposed meaning. The discourse which Weil acknowledges as nonviolent is ontology, the project of ontology. (Cf. *Logique de la philosophie*, e.g., pp. 28ff., "La naissance de l'ontologie, le discours.") "Harmony between men will be established by itself if men are not concerned with themselves, but with what is;" its polarity is infinite coherence, and its style, at least, is Hegelian. This coherence in ontology is violence itself for Levinas: the "end of history" is not absolute Logic, the absolute coherence of the Logos with itself in itself; nor is it harmony in the absolute System, but Peace in separation, the diaspora of absolutes. Inversely, is not peaceful discourse, according to Levinas, the discourse which respects separation and rejects the horizon of ontological coherence, violence itself for Weil? Let us schematize: according to Weil, violence will be, or rather would be, reduced only with the reduction of alterity, or the will to alterity. The reverse is true for Levinas. But for Levinas coherence is always finite (totality, in the meaning he gives to the word, rejecting any possible meaning for the notion of infinite totality). For Weil, it is the notion of alterity, on the contrary, which implies irreducible finitude. But for both, only the infinite is nonviolent, and it can be announced only in discourse. One should examine the common presuppositions of this convergence and divergence. One should ask whether the predetermination, common to these two systems, of violation and of pure logos, and, above all, the predetermination of their incompatibility, refers to an absolute truth, or perhaps to an epoch of the history of thought, the history of Being. Let us note that Bataille too, in *Eroticism*, draws inspiration from Weil's concepts, and states this explicitly.
- 43 TN. Derrida is playing on the double sense of *regard* as ethical concern and as objectifying glance. Cf. note 10 above.
- 44 At bottom, it is the very notion of a "constitution of an alter ego" to which Levinas refuses any merit. He would probably say, with Sartre, "One encounters the Other, one does not constitute it" (*Being and Nothingness*). This is to understand the word "constitution" in a sense that Husserl often warns his reader against. Constitution is not opposed to encounter. It goes without saying that

constitution creates, constructs, engenders, nothing: neither existence, nor the fact, which is evident, nor even meaning, which is less evident but equally certain, provided that one takes some patient precautions, and provided that one distinguishes the moments of passivity and activity within intuition, in Husserl's sense, and the moment in which the distinction becomes impossible. That is, in which the entire problematic opposing "encounter" to "constitution" is no longer meaningful, or has only a derivative and dependent meaning. Unable to enter into these difficulties here, let us simply recall this warning of Husserl's, among so many others: "Here too, as concerns the alter ego, the 'constitution of consciousness' (*Bewusstseinsleistung*) does not mean that I invent (*erfinde*) and that I *make* (*make*) this supreme transcendence." (In question is God.)

Inversely, does not the notion of encounter—a notion to which one must refer, if one rejects all constitution, in the Husserlian sense of the term—aside from being prey to empiricism, let it be understood that there is a time and an experience without "other" *before* the encounter? The difficulties into which one is driven can be imagined. Husserl's philosophical prudence on this matter is exemplary. The *Cartesian Meditations* often emphasize that in *fact, really*, nothing precedes the experience of Others.

- 45 Or at least cannot *be*, or be anything; and it is indeed the authority of Being which Levinas profoundly questions. That his discourse must still submit to the contested agency is a necessity whose rule we must attempt to inscribe systematically in the text.
- 46 This connaturality of discourse and of violence does not appear to us to have *emerged* in history, nor to be tied to a given form of communication, or again to a given "philosophy." We wish to show here that this connaturality belongs to the very essence of history, to transcendental historicity, a notion which here can only be understood in the resonance of a speech common—in a way that still calls for clarification—to Hegel, Husserl, and Heidegger.

Historical or ethnosociological information here can only confirm or support, under the rubric of the factual example, the eidetic-transcendental evidence. Even if this information is manipulated (gathered, described, explicated) with the greatest philosophical or methodological prudence, that is, even if it is articulated correctly with the essential reading, and if it respects all levels of eidetic generality, in no case could it *found* or *demonstrate* any necessity of essence. For example, we are not sure that these technical, as well as transcendental precautions are taken by Claude Lévi-Strauss when, in *Tristes tropiques*, amongst many beautiful pages, he advances the "hypothesis" "that the primary function of written communication is to facilitate servitude." If writing—and, indeed, speech in general—retains within it an essential violence, this cannot be "demonstrated" or "verified" on the basis of "facts," whatever sphere they are borrowed from and even if the totality of the "facts" in this domain were available. One can often see in the descriptive practice of the "social sciences" the most *seductive* (in every sense of the word) confusion of empirical investigation, inductive hypothesis and intuition of essence, without any precautions as to the origin and function of the propositions advanced.

- 47 Alterity, difference, and time are not *suppressed* but *retained* by absolute knowledge in the form of the *Aufhebung*.
- 48 *Formale und transzendente Logik* (Halle 1929), p. 209. Husserl's italics.
- 49 *Ibid.*, pp. 209–10.
- 50 *Ibid.*, p. 222.
- 51 Of course we cannot do so here. Far from thinking that this fifth of the *Cartesian Meditations* must be admired in silence as the last word on this problem, we have

- sought here only to begin to experience and to respect its power of resistance to Levinas's criticisms.
- 52 "Die Frage des Warum ist ursprünglich Frage nach der Geschichte." Husserl (unpublished E, III, 9, 1931.)
 - 53 *Logische Untersuchungen* (Tübingen 1968), vol. 2, I, para. 4, p. 115.
 - 54 *Ibid.*, p. 124.
 - 55 *L'ontologie est-elle fondamentale?*
 - 56 *Brief über den "Humanismus,"* p. 192.
 - 57 "We go further, and at the risk of seeming to confuse theory and practice, we treat the one and the other as modes of metaphysical transcendence. The apparent confusion is willful, and constitutes one of the theses of this book" (TI).
 - 58 *Brief über den "Humanismus,"* p. 192.
 - 59 On this turning back to Being within the predicative, within the articulation essence-existence, etc., cf., among a thousand examples, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, pp. 40ff.
 - 60 By the expression "Being of the existent," the source of so many confusions, we do not understand, here, as Heidegger does occasionally when the context is clear enough to prevent misunderstanding, the Being-existent of the existent, existenthood (*Seiendheit*), but rather the Being of existenthood, which Heidegger also calls the truth of Being.
 - 61 "The thought which asks the question of the truth of Being . . . is neither ethics nor ontology. This is why the question of the relationship between these two disciplines is henceforth without foundation in this domain." (*Humanismus* p. 188).
 - 62 *L'ontologie est-elle fondamentale?*
 - 63 An explicit theme in *Being and Time*, for example. Cf. the opposition of *Sorge*, *besorgen* and *Fürsorge* in section 26.
 - 64 In the same problematical horizon, one may confront Heidegger's procedures (for example, in the *Introduction to Metaphysics*, "On the Grammar and Etymology of the Word 'Being'") with Benveniste's ("Être et avoir dans leurs fonctions linguistiques," in *Problèmes de linguistique générale*).
 - 65 Here we could refer to a hundred passages from Heidegger. Rather, let us cite Levinas, who had written, however: "For Heidegger, the comprehension of Being is not a purely theoretical act . . . an act of knowledge like any other" (*EDE*).
 - 66 It is not necessary to return to the pre-Socratics here. Aristotle already had rigorously demonstrated that Being is neither genre nor principle. (Cf. for example, *Metaphysics* B, 3, 998 b 20). Does not this demonstration, made at the same time as a critique of Plato, in truth confirm one of the *Sophist's* intentions? There, Being was certainly defined as one of the "largest genres," and as the most universal of predicates, but also as that which permits all predication in general. As the origin and possibility of predication, it is not a predicate, not, at least, a predicate like any other, but a *transcendental* or *transcategorical* predicate. Further, the *Sophist*—and this is its theme—teaches us to think that Being—which is other than the other and other the same, is the same as itself, and is implied by all genres to the extent that they are—far from closing difference, on the contrary liberates it, and itself is what it is only by this liberation.
 - 67 *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, trans. James S. Churchill (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962), p. 233.

On the nonconceptual character of the thought of Being, cf., among other places *Vom Wesen des Grundes* (*On the Essence of Reason*) in *Wegmarken* pp. 29ff.; *Humanismus*, pp. 168ff.; *Einführung in die Metaphysik* (*Introduction to Metaphysics*) pp. 30ff.; and *Holzwege*. And, primarily, section 1 of *Being and Time*.

- 68 The essential relations between the same and the other (difference) are such that even the hypothesis of a subsumption of the other by the same—violence, according to Levinas—has no meaning. The same is not a category, but the possibility of every category. Here, we should attentively compare Levinas's theses with Heidegger's text entitled *Identity and Difference* (1957). For Levinas, the same is the concept, just as Being and unity are concepts, and these three concepts immediately communicate among each other (cf. *TI* p. 274, for example). For Heidegger, the same is not the identical (cf. *Humanismus*, for example). And, mainly, because it is not a category. The same is not the negation of difference, nor is Being.
- 69 *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* pp. 235–36.
- 70 In his very fine study, *Heidegger et la pensée de la finitude*, Henri Birault shows how the theme of *Endlichkeit* is progressively abandoned by Heidegger, for “the same reason which had motivated its use at a certain time” due to “concern for separating from the thought of Being not only the survivals and metamorphoses of Christian theology, but still the *theological* itself, which is absolutely constitutive of metaphysics as such. In effect, if the Heideggerean concept of *Endlichkeit* was never the Christian-theological concept of finitude, it nevertheless remains that the idea of finite Being is in itself *ontologically* theological and, as such, is incapable of satisfying a thought which draws back from Metaphysics only to meditate, in the light of the forgotten truth of Being, the still hidden unity of its onto-theological essence” (*Revue internationale de philosophie*, 1960, no. 52). A thought which seeks to go to its very end in its language, to the end of what is envisaged under the name of original finitude or finitude of Being, therefore should abandon not only the words and themes of the finite and the infinite, but also, which is doubtless *impossible*, everything that they govern in language, in the deepest sense of the word. This last impossibility does not signify that the beyond of metaphysics is impracticable; on the contrary, it confirms the necessity for this incommensurable overflow to take support from metaphysics. A necessity clearly recognized by Heidegger. Indeed, it marks that only difference is fundamental, and that Being is nothing outside the existent.
- 71 “Liberté et commandement,” *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*, 1953.
- 72 *Vom Wesen des Grundes* pp. 56ff. and *Einführung in die Metaphysik* p. 150.
- 73 *Humanismus*, p. 154.
- 74 *Ibid.*
- 75 *Ibid.*, p. 133.
- 76 *Ibid.*
- 77 Rather, let us cite a passage from *Of Learned Ignorance* in which Nicholas of Cusa says: “The creature comes from God, yet it cannot, in consequence of that, add anything to Him who is the Maximum [Being]. How are we going to be able to form an idea of creature as such?” And in order to illustrate “the double process of envelopment and development” “whose mode is absolutely unknown,” he writes: “It is as if a face were reproduced in its own image. With multiplication of the image we get distant and close reproductions of the face. (I do not mean distance in space but a gradual distance from the true face, since without that multiplication would be impossible.) In the many different images of that face one face would appear in many, different ways, but it would be an appearance that the senses would be incapable of recognizing and the mind of understanding.” *Of Learned Ignorance*, trans. Father Germain Heron [London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1954], p. 79.
- 78 The thought of Being is what permits us to say, without naïveté, reduction, or blasphemy, “God, for example.” That is, to *think* God as what he is without

making an object of him. This is what Levinas, here in agreement with all the most classical inflexible metaphysics, would judge to be impossible, absurd, or purely verbal: how to think what one says when one proposes the expression, *God—or the infinite—for example?* But the notion of exemplariness would offer more than one piece of resistance to this objection.

- 79 In a violent article (*Heidegger, Gagarine et nous* in *Difficile liberté*, Heidegger is designated as the enemy of technology and classed among the “enemies of industrial society,” who “most often are reactionaries.” This is an accusation to which Heidegger has so frequently and so clearly responded that we can do no better than to refer to his writings, in particular to *La question de la technique*, which treats technology as a “mode of unveiling” (in *Essais et conférences*), to the *Letter on Humanism*, and to the *Introduction to Metaphysics (The Limitation of Being)*, where a certain violence, of which we will speak in a moment, is linked in a nonpejorative and nonethical way to technology in the unveiling of Being (*daïnon-techné*).

In any event, we can see the specificity of the accusation made by Levinas. Being (as concept) would be the violence of the neutral. The sacred would be the neutralization of the personal God. The “reaction” against technology would not have as its target the danger of technical depersonalization, but precisely that which liberates from ravishment by the Sacred and implantation in the Site.

- 80 Since we cannot unfold this debate here, we will refer to the clearest of Heidegger’s texts on this point: (a) *Sein und Zeit*: the themes of essential *Unheimlichkeit*, of the “nudity” of being-in-the-world, “*als Un-zuhause*.” It is precisely this authentic condition that the neutral existence of the *One* flees from. (b) *Humanismus*: concerning Hölderlin’s poem *Return*, Heidegger notes that in his commentary the word “country” is “thought in an essential sense, not at all a patriotic sense, nor a nationalist sense, but rather, from the point of view of the History of Being.” (c) In the same location, Heidegger writes in particular: “On the metaphysical plane, every nationalism is an anthropologism, and as such, a subjectivism. Nationalism is not overcome by pure internationalism, but is rather enlarged and set up as a system.” (d) Finally, as concerns the dwelling and the home (whose praises Levinas also understands himself to sing, but, it is true, as a moment of interiority, and precisely as economy), Heidegger indeed specifies that the home does not metaphorically determine Being on the basis of its economy but, on the contrary, can only be determined as such on the basis of the essence of Being. Cf. also . . . *L’homme habite en poète*, in which, let us note in passing, Heidegger distinguishes the Same and the Equal (*das Selbe—das Gleiche*): “The Same sets to one side any haste to resolve differences in the Equal,” in *Essais et conférences*.

- 81 Cf., for example, *Erläuterungen zu Hölderlins Dichtung* (Frankfurt, 1963), p. 14.

- 82 Ibid.

- 83 Ibid., p. 27.

- 84 Cf. also *Vom Wesen des Grundes*. Theology, the thinking of the existent-God, of the essence and existence of God, thus would suppose the thinking of Being. Here we need not refer to Heidegger in order to understand this movement, but first to Duns Scotus, to whom Heidegger had devoted one of his first writings, as is well known. For Duns Scotus, the thought of common and uniform Being is necessarily prior to the thought of the determined existent (determined, for example, as finite or infinite, created or uncreated, etc.). Which does not mean:

First, that common and uniform Being is a genre, and that Duns Scotus revives the Aristotelian demonstration without nevertheless referring to the analogy. (On this subject, cf. notably Etienne Gilson, *Jean Duns Scot, Introduction à ses positions fondamentales*, pp. 104–5.)

Second, that the doctrine of the uniformity of Being is incompatible with the Aristotelian-Thomist doctrine and with the analogy which, as Gilson shows (*ibid.*, pp. 84–115), is situated on another plane, and answers a different question. The problem which presents itself to Scotus—and which is the one which occupies us here, in the dialogue between Levinas and Heidegger—“is therefore posed on a terrain,” writes Gilson, “which is no longer Aristotle’s nor Aquinas’s, because in order to penetrate it, one must first have emerged from the dilemma imposed by Aristotelianism between the universal and the singular, the ‘first’ and the ‘second,’ and thereby have escaped the necessity of choosing between the analogous and the uniform, which can only be accomplished by isolating a notion of Being in some way metaphysically pure of all determination” (*ibid.*, p. 89). It follows that if the thought of Being (which Gilson, differing from Heidegger, here calls “metaphysics”) is implied in all theology, it does not precede it, or govern it in any way, as would a principle or a concept. The relations of “first” and “second,” etc., have no meaning here.

- 85 Sartre, like Levinas, had earlier interpreted the *Mitsein* in the sense of camaraderie, the team, etc. Here, we refer to *Being and Time*. Cf. also, *Le concept du monde chez Heidegger*. In this work, Walter Biemel, with much precision and clarity, confronts this interpretation with Heidegger’s intentions (pp. 90ff.). Let us add simply that the *with* of the *Mitsein* originally no more denotes the structure of a team animated by a neutral common task than does the *with* of the “language with God” (*TI*). The Being which can interpellate the *Mitsein* is not, as Levinas often gives us to understand, a third term, a common truth, etc. Finally, the notion of *Mitsein* describes an original structure of the relationship between *Da-Sein* and *Da-Sein* which is prior to every meaning of “encounter” or of “constitution,” that is, to the debate which we mentioned above. (Cf. also *Being and Time*: “*With* and *also* must be understood as existentials and not as categories.”)
- 86 Cf. *Introduction to Metaphysics* (especially “The Limitation of Being”).
- 87 We must specify here, that “ontology” does not refer to the concept of ontology which Heidegger proposes to renounce (cf. above [note 4]), but to the unfindable expression by which it must be replaced. The word “historical” also must be modified in order to be understood in consonance with the word “ontological,” of which it is not an attribute, and in relation to which it marks no derivation.
- 88 Nicholas of Cusa, *The Idiot*, translated (1650) from *Idiota* (1450), edited by P. Radin (San Francisco: California State Library Occasional Papers, Reprint Series no. 19, 1940), pp. 15–16.
- 89 *Entre deux mondes* (“Biographie spirituelle de Franz Rosenzweig” in *La conscience juive* [Paris: P.U.F. 1963], p. 126). This lecture, along with an article by A. Nêher (*Cahiers de l’Institut de science économique appliqué*, 1959, is the only important text devoted to Rosenzweig, better known in France as the author of *Hegel und der Staat* than of *Der Stern der Erlösung* (*The Star of Redemption*, 1921). Rosenzweig’s influence on Levinas seems to have been profound. “We were impressed by the opposition to the idea of totality in Franz Rosenzweig’s *Stern der Erlösung*, a work too often present in this book to be cited” *TI*, p. 28.
- 90 In his *Exposition of Philosophical Empiricism* Schelling wrote: “Thus God would be Being enclosed in itself in an absolute manner, would be substance in the most elevated sense, free of every relation. But from the very fact that we consider these determinations as purely immanent, as relating to nothing external, one finds oneself in the necessity of having to conceive them by parting from *Him*, that is, to conceive him as the *prius*, that is as the absolute *prius*. And it is thus that, pushed to its final consequences, empiricism leads us to the supra-empirical.”

Naturally, by "enclosed" and "enfolded" one is not to understand finite closure and egoistic muteness, but rather absolute alterity, what Levinas calls the Infinite absolved of relation. An analogous movement is outlined in Bergson, who, in his *Introduction to Metaphysics*, criticizes the empiricist doctrines unfaithful to pure experience in the name of true empiricism, and concludes: "This true empiricism is the true metaphysics."

- 91 Pure difference is not absolutely different (from nondifference). Hegel's critique of the concept of pure difference is for us here, doubtless, the most uncircumventable theme. Hegel thought absolute difference, and showed that it can be pure only by being impure. In the *Science of Logic*, as concerns *Absolute Difference*, Hegel writes, for example: "This difference is difference in-and-for-itself, absolute difference, the difference of Essence. It is difference in-and-for-itself not by the effect of an external cause, but a difference in relation to itself, thus a simple difference. It is essential to see in absolute difference a simple difference . . . Difference in itself is difference in relation to itself; thus it is its own negativity, difference not in relation to an *other*, but in relation to itself . . . What differentiates difference is identity. Difference, thus, is both itself and identity. Both together make difference; difference is both the All and its own moment. It can just as much be said that difference, as simple, is not difference at all; it is such first in relation to identity; but as such, difference contains both itself and this relationship. Difference is the All and its own moment, just as identity is the All and its own moment" (*Wissenschaft der Logik*, [Leipzig O. J.], 2:48–49).
- 92 James Joyce, *Ulysses*; p. 622. But Levinas does not care for Ulysses, nor for the ruses of this excessively Hegelian hero, this man of *nostos* and the closed circle, whose adventure is always summarized in its totality. Levinas often reproaches him. "To the myth of Ulysses returning to Ithaca, we would prefer to oppose the story of Abraham leaving his country forever for an as yet unknown land, and forbidding his servant to take back even his son to the point of departure" (*La trace de l'autre*). The impossibility of the return doubtless was not overlooked by Heidegger: the original historicity of Being, the originality of difference, and irreducible wandering all forbid the return to Being *itself* which is nothing. Therefore, Levinas here is in agreement with Heidegger. Inversely, is the theme of the return as unhebraic as all that? While constructing Bloom and Stephen (Saint Stephen, the Hellenic-Jew), Joyce took great interest in the theses of Victor Bérard, who saw Ulysses as a Semite. It is true that "Jewgreek is greekjew" is a *neutral* proposition, anonymous in the sense execrated by Levinas, inscribed in Lynch's *headpiece*. "Language of no one," Levinas would say. Moreover, it is attributed to what is called "feminine logic": "Woman's reason. Jewgreek is greekjew." On this subject, let us note in passing that *Totality and Infinity* pushes the respect for dissymmetry so far that it seems to us impossible, essentially impossible, that it could have been written by a woman. Its philosophical subject is man (*vir*). (Cf., for example, the *Phenomenology of Eros*, which occupies such an important place in the book's economy.) Is not this principled impossibility for a book to have been written by a woman unique in the history of metaphysical writing? Levinas acknowledges elsewhere that femininity is an "ontological category." Should this remark be placed in relation to the essential virility of metaphysical language? But perhaps metaphysical desire is essentially virile, even in what is called woman. It appears that this is what Freud (who would have misconstrued sexuality as the "relationship with what is absolutely other," *TT*), thought, not of desire, certainly, but of libido.

AT THIS VERY MOMENT IN THIS WORK HERE I AM

Jacques Derrida

Translated by Ruben Berezdivin¹

Source: R. Bernasconi and S. Critchley (eds) *Re-Reading Levinas*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991, pp. 11–48. Originally published in French as “En ce moment meme dans cet ouvrage me voici”, in F. Laruelle (ed.) *Textes pour Emmanuel Levinas*, Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1980. Reprinted in *Psyche: Invention de l'autre*, Paris: Galilée, 1987.

— He will have obligated (*il aura obligé*).

At this very instant, you hear me, I have just said it. He will have obligated. If you hear me, already you are sensible to the strange event. Not that you have been visited, but as after the passing by of some singular visitor, you are no longer familiar with the places, those very places where nonetheless the little phrase—Where does it come from? Who pronounced it?—still leaves its resonance lingering (*égarée*).

As if from now on we didn't dwell there any longer, and to tell the truth, as if we had never been at home. But you aren't uneasy, what you feel—something unheard of yet so very ancient—is not a malaise; and even if something is affecting you without having touched you, [22] still you have been deprived of nothing. No negation ought to be able to measure itself up to what is happening so as to be able to describe it.

Notice, you can still hear yourself (*tu peux encore t'entendre*) all alone repeating the three words [*“il aura obligé”*], you have failed neither to hear its rumor nor understand its sense. You are no longer without them, without these words which are discrete, and thereby unlimited, overflowing with discretion. I myself no longer know where to stop them. What surrounds them? He will have obligated. The edges of the phrase remain drowned in a fog. Nevertheless it seems quite plain and clearly set off (*decoupée*) in its authoritarian brevity, complete without appeal, without requiring any adjective or complement, not even any noun: he will have obligated. But precisely, nothing surrounds it sufficiently to assure us of its limits. The

sentence is not evasive but its border lies concealed. About the phrase, whose movement can't be resumed by any of the one, two, three words ["il aura obligé"] of one, two, three syllables, about it you can no longer say that nothing is happening at this very moment. But what then? The shore is lacking, the edges of a phrase belong to the night.

He will have obligated—distanced (*éloigné*) from all context.

That's right, distanced, which does not forbid, on the contrary, proximity. What they call a context and which comes to shut in the sense of a discourse, always more or less, is never simply absent, only more or less strict. But no cut *is* there, no utterance is ever cut from all context, the context is never annulled without remainder. One must therefore negotiate, deal with, transact with marginal effects (*les effets de bord*). One must even negotiate what is nonnegotiable and which overflows all context.

Here at this very moment, when I am here trying to give you to understand, the border of a context is less narrow, less strictly determining than one is accustomed to believe. "Il aura obligé": there you have a phrase that may appear to some terribly indeterminate. But the distance that is granted to us here would not be due so much to a certain quite apparent absence of an edge ("il aura obligé," without a nameable subject, complement, attribute, or identifiable past or future on this page, in this work [*ouvrage*] at the moment when you hear yourself presently reading it), but rather because of a certain *inside* of what is said and of the saying of what is said *in* the phrase, and which, from within, if this may still be said, infinitely *overflows* at a stroke all possible context. And that at the very moment, in a work, for example—but you don't yet know what I mean by that word, work—when the wholly other who will have visited this phrase negotiates the nonnegotiable with a context, negotiates his economy *as* that of the other.

He will have obligated.

You must find me enigmatic, a bit glib or perverse in cultivating the enigma every time I repeat this little [23] phrase, always the same, and lacking context, becoming more and more obscure. No, and I say this without studying the effect, the possibility of this repetition is the very thing that interests me, interests you as well, even before we should happen to find it interesting, and I should like slowly to move closer (to you, maybe, but by a proximity that binds [*lie*], he would say, to the first comer, to the unmatched other, before all contract, without any present being able to gather together a contact), slowly to bring myself closer to this, namely that I can no longer formalize, since the event ["il aura obligé"] will have precisely defied within language (*la langue*) this power of formalization. He will have obligated to comprehend, let us say rather to receive, because affection, an affection more passive than passivity, is party to all this, he will have obligated to receive totally otherwise the little phrase. To my knowledge he has never pronounced it as such, it matters little. He will have obligated to "read" it totally otherwise. Now to make us (without making us) receive otherwise,

and receive otherwise the otherwise, he has been unable to do otherwise than negotiate with the risk: in the same language, the language of the same, one may always ill receive what is thus otherwise said. Even before that fault, the risk contaminates its very proposition. What becomes of this fault then? And if it is inevitable, what sort of event is at issue? Where would it take place?

He will have obligated. However distanced it may remain, there is certainly some context in that phrase.

You hear it resonate, at this very moment, in this work.

What I thus call "this work" is not, especially not, dominated by the name of Emmanuel Levinas.

It is rather meant to be given to him. Given according to his name, in his name as much as to his name. Therefore there are multiple chances, probabilities, you cannot avoid surrendering to them, so that the subject of the phrase, "il aura obligé," might be Emmanuel Levinas.

Still it is not sure. And even if one could be sure of it, would one thereby have responded to the question: Who is the "He" ("Il") in that phrase?

Following a strange title that resembles a cryptic quotation in its invisible quotation marks, the site of this phrase "princeps" doesn't allow you yet to know by what right *He* carries a capital. Perhaps not only as an incipit, and, in this hypothesis of another capital letter or of the capital letter of the Other, be attentive to all the consequences. It is drawn into the play of the irreplaceable *He* submitting itself to substitution, like an object, into the irreplaceable itself. He, without italics.

I wonder why I have to address myself to you to say that. And why after so many attempts, so many failures, here I am obligated to renounce the anonymous neutrality of a discourse proposed, in its form at least, to no matter whom, pretending self-mastery and mastery of its object in a formalization without remainder? I won't pronounce your name nor inscribe it, but you [24] are not anonymous at the moment when here I am telling you this, *sending it* to you like a letter, giving it to you to hear or to read, *giving* being infinitely more important to me than what it might transmit at the moment I receive the desire from you, at the moment when I let you dictate to me what I would like to give you of myself. Why? Why at this very moment?

Suppose that in giving to you—it little matters what—I wanted to give to him, him Emmanuel Levinas. Not render him anything, homage for example, not even render myself to him, but to give him something which escapes from the circle of restitution or of the "rendez-vous." ("Proximity," he writes, "doesn't enter into that common time of clocks that makes the rendez-vous possible. It is derangement.") I would like to do it faultlessly (*sans faute*), with a "faultlessness" (*sans-faute*) that no longer belongs to the time or logic of the rendez-vous. Beyond any possible restitution, there would be need for my gesture to operate without debt, in absolute ingratitude. The trap is that I then pay homage, the only possible homage, to his work

(*oeuvre*), to what his work says of the Work (*Oeuvre*): "The Work thought to the end requires a radical generosity of the movement in which the Same goes toward the Other. Consequently, it requires an *ingratitude* from the other." He will have written this twice, in appearance literally identically, in *The Trace of the Other* and in *Signification and Sense*. But one cannot economize on this *seriality*. I will return to this.

Suppose then that I wished to give to him, to E. L., and beyond all restitution. I will have to do it in *conformance* with what he will have said of the Work in his work, in the Work of his work. I will still be caught in the circle of debt and restitution with which the nonnegotiable will have to be negotiated. I would be debating with myself, interminably, forever, and even before having known it, up to the point, perhaps, when I would affirm the absolutely anachronic dissymetry of a debt without loan, acknowledgment, or possible restitution.

According to which he will have immemorably obligated even before calling himself by any name whatsoever or belonging to any genre whatsoever. The conformity of *conformance* is no longer thinkable within that logic of truth which dominates—without being able to command it—our language and the language of philosophy. If in order to give without restituting, I must still conform to what he says of the Work in his work, and to what he gives there as well as to a re-tracing of the giving; more precisely, if I must conform my gesture to what makes the Work in his Work, which is older than his work, and whose Saying according to his own terms is not reducible to the Said, there we are, engaged before all engagement, in an incredible logic, formal and nonformal. If I restitute, if I restitute without fault, I am at fault. And if I do not restitute, by *giving* beyond acknowledgment, I risk the fault. I leave for now in this word—fault—all the liberty of its registers, from crime to [25] a fault of spelling. As to the proper name of what finds itself at issue here, as to the proper name of the other, that would, perhaps, return/amount to the same (*cela reviendrait peut-être au même*).

There you are, forewarned: it is the risk or chance of that fault that fascinates or obsesses me at this very moment, and what can happen to a faulty writing, to a faulty letter (the one I write you), what can remain of it, what the ineluctable possibility of such a fault gives to think about a text or a remainder. Ineluctable since the structure of "faultiness" is, a priori, older even than any a priori. If anyone (He) tells you *from the start* (*d'abord*): "don't return to me what I give you," you are at fault even before he finishes talking. It suffices that you hear him, that you begin to understand and acknowledge. You have begun to receive his injunction, to give yourself to what he says, and the more you obey him in restituting nothing, the better you will disobey him and become deaf to what he addresses to you. All that might resemble a logical paradox or trap. But it is "anterior" to all logic. I spoke, *wrongly*, of a trap just now. It is only felt as a trap from the moment

when one would pretend to escape from absolute dissymmetry through a will to mastery or coherence. It would be a way to acknowledge the gift in order to refuse it. Nothing is more difficult than to accept a gift. Now what I “want” to “do” here is to accept the gift, to affirm and reaffirm it as what I have received. Not from someone who would himself have had the initiative for it, but from someone who would have had the force to receive it and reaffirm it. And if it is thus that (in my turn) I give to you, it will no longer form a chain of restitutions, but another gift, the gift of the other. Is that possible? Will it have been possible? Shouldn’t it have already taken place, before everything, so that the very question may emerge from it, which in advance renders the question obsolete?

The gift *is not*. One cannot ask “what is the gift?”; yet it is only on that *condition* that there will have been, by this name or another, a gift.

Hence, suppose that beyond all restitution, in radical ingratitude (but notice, not just any ingratitude, not in the ingratitude that still belongs to the circle of acknowledgment and reciprocity), I desire (it desires in me, but the it [*le ça*] is not a neutral non-me), I desire to try to give to E. L. This or that? Such and such a thing? A discourse, a thought, a writing? No, that would still give rise to exchange, commerce, economic reappropriation. No, to give him the very giving of giving, a giving which might no longer even be an object or a present said, because every present remains within the economic sphere of the same, nor an impersonal infinitive (the “giving” [*le “donner”*] therefore must perforate the grammatical phenomenon dominated by the current interpretation of language), nor any operation or action sufficiently self-identical to return to the same. That “giving” must be neither a thing nor an act, it must somehow be [26] someone (male or female) not *me*: nor him (“he”). Strange, isn’t it, this excess that overflows language at every instant and yet requires it, sets it incessantly into motion at the very moment of traversing it? That traversal is not a transgression, the passage of a cutting limit; the very metaphor of overflowing (*débordement*) no longer fits insofar as it still implies some linearity.

Even before I attempt or desire to attempt it, suppose that the desire for that gift is evoked in me by the other, without however obligating me or at least before any obligation of constraint, of a contract, or gratitude, or acknowledgment of the debt: a duty without debt, a debt without contract. That should be able to do without him or happen with anyone: hence it demands, *at once*, this anonymity, this possibility of indefinitely equivalent substitution *and* the singularity, nay the absolute uniqueness of the proper name. Beyond any thing, beyond whatever might lead it astray or seduce it toward something else, beyond everything that could somehow or other return to me, such a gift should go right to the unique, to what his name will have *uniquely* named, to that uniqueness that his name will have given. This *right* does not derive from any right, from any jurisdiction transcendent to the gift itself; it is the right of what he calls, in a sense that perhaps you

don't understand yet, because it disturbs language every time it visits it, *rectitude* or *sincerity*.

Which his name will have *uniquely* named or given. But (but it would require saying *but* for every word) uniquely in another sense than that of the singularity which jealously guards its propriety or property as irreplaceable subject within the proper name of an author or proprietor, in the sufficiency of a self assured of its signature. Finally, suppose that in the wake of the gift I commit a fault, that I let a fault, as they say, slip by, that I don't write straight (*que je n'écrive pas droit*), that I fail to write as one must (but *one must* [*il faut*], *one must* understand otherwise the *one must*), or that I fail to give him, *to him*, a gift that is not *his*. I am not at this very moment thinking of a fault on his name, on his forename or patronym, but with such a default in the writing that in the end would constitute a fault of spelling, a bad treatment inflicted on this proper name, whether done consciously or expressly by me or not.

Since in that fault your body is at issue (*il y va*), and since, as I previously said, the gift I would make him comes from you who dictate it to me, your unease grows. In what could such a fault consist? Shall one ever be able to avoid it? Were it inevitable, and hence in the final account irreparable, why should reparation require claiming? And especially, above all, on this hypothesis, What would have taken place? I mean: What would happen (and about what? Or whom?)? What would be the proper place of this text, of this faulty body? Will it have properly taken place? Where should you and I, we, let it be? [27]

— No, not let it be. Soon, we shall have to give it to him to eat, and drink, and you will listen to me.

— Does the body of a faulty text take place? He himself has an answer to this question, so it seems. There should be no protocols for gifts, nor preliminaries awaiting for conditions of possibility. Or the protocols should then already constitute a gift. It is under the heading of a protocol, and hence without knowing up to what point here a gift is probable, that I would like first (*d'abord*) to start interrogating his response to the question of the faulty text. His answer is first of all practical: he deals with the fault, deals with the fault by writing in a certain way and not in another. The interest I take in the manner he writes his works (*ouvrages*) may appear out of place: to write, in the current sense of the word, to concoct phrases and compose, exploit a rhetoric or a poetics, etc., is not in the last instance what matters to him, being a collection of subordinated gestures. And yet I believe that the obligation at issue in our little phrase quoted above *ties itself* (*se noue*) into a certain kind of binding (*lier*), not only of the Saying with the Said, but of Writing to the Said and of Saying to the written; and ties itself to a binding, a tightening, an enchaining together and an interlacing according to a serial

structure of a singular type. Soon I will come back to what I am myself lacing together in the word *series*.

How, then, does he write? How does what he writes make a work (*ouvrage*), and make the Work (*Oeuvre*) in the work (*ouvrage*)? For instance, and most especially, what does he do when he writes in the present, in the grammatical form of the present, to say what cannot be nor ever will have been present, the *present said* only presenting itself in the name of a Saying that overflows it infinitely within and without, like a sort of absolute anachrony of the wholly other that, although incommensurably heterogeneous to the language of the present and the discourse of the same, nonetheless must leave a trace of it, always improbably but each time determinate, this one, and not another? How does he manage to inscribe or let the wholly other be inscribed within the language of being, of the present, of essence, of the same, of economy, etc., within its syntax and lexicon, under its law? How does he manage to give a place there to what remains absolutely foreign to that medium, absolutely unbound from that language, beyond being, the present, essence, the same, the economy, etc.? Mustn't one reverse the question, at least in appearance, and ask oneself if that language is not *of itself unbound* and hence open to the wholly other, to its own beyond, in such a way that it is less a matter of exceeding that language than of treating it otherwise with its own possibilities. Treating it otherwise, in other words to calculate the transaction, negotiate the compromise that would leave the nonnegotiable intact, and to do this in such a way as to make the fault, which consists in inscribing the wholly other within the empire of the same, alter the same enough to absolve itself from itself. According to me that is his answer, and that [28] *de facto* answer, if one may say so, that response in deed, at work rather in the series of strategic negotiations, that response does not respond to a problem or a question, it responds to the Other—for the Other—and approaches (*aborde*) writing in enjoining itself to that for-the-Other. It is by starting from the Other that writing thus gives a place and forms an event, for example this one: "Il aura obligé."

It is that response, the responsibility of that response, that I would like to interrogate in its turn. Interrogate, to be sure, is not the word, and I don't yet know how to qualify what is happening here between him, you, and me that doesn't belong to the order of questions and responses. It would be rather his responsibility—and what he says of responsibility—that interrogates us beyond all the coded discourses on the subject.

Hence: What is he doing, how does he work (*oeuvre*) when, under the false appearance of a present, in a more-than-present (*plus-que-présent*), he will have written this, for example, where I slowly read to you, at this very moment, listen:

Responsibility for the other, going against intentionality and the will which intentionality does not succeed in dissimulating, signifies not the

disclosure of a given and its reception, but the exposure of me to the other, prior to every decision. There is a claim laid on the Same by the Other in the core of myself, the extreme tension of the command exercised by the Other in me over me, a traumatic hold of the other on the Same, which does not allow the Same time to await the Other. . . . The subject in responsibility is alienated in the depths of its identity with an alienation that does not empty the Same of its identity, but constrains it to it, with an unimpeachable assignation, constrains it to it as no one else, where no one could replace it. The psyche, a uniqueness outside of concepts, is a seed of folly, already a psychosis. It is not an ego (*Moi*), but me (*moi*) under assignation. There is an assignation to an identity for the response of responsibility, where one cannot have oneself be replaced without fault. To this command continually put forth only a "here I am" (*me voici*) can answer, where the pronoun "I" is in the accusative, declined before any declension, possessed by the other, sick,² identical. Here I am—an inspired saying, which is not a gift for fine words or songs. There is constraint to give with full hands, and thus a constraint to corporeality. . . . It is the subjectivity of a man of flesh and blood, more passive in its extradition to the other than the passivity of effects in a causal chain, for it is beyond the unity of apperception of the *I think*, which is actuality itself. It is a being-torn-up-from-oneself-for-another in the giving-to-the-other-of-the-bread-out-of-one's-own-mouth. This is not an anodyne formal relation, but all the gravity of the body extirpated from its *conatus essendi* [29] in the possibility of giving. The identity of the subject is here brought out, not by resting upon itself, but by a restlessness that drives me outside of the nucleus of my substantiality.

(I should have liked slowly to consider the title of the work (*ouvrage*) which I have just quoted: in a singular comparative locution that does not constitute a phrase, an adverb (*otherwise*) immeasurably wins out over a verb (and what a verb: to be) to say something "other" that cannot make nor even modify a noun or a verb, nor this noun-verb which always amounts/returns to *being*, in order to say something else, some "other" thing that is neither verb nor noun, and especially not the simple alterity that would still submit the *otherwise* (that modality without substance) to the authority of a category, an essence or being again. The beyond of verbalization (constitution into a verb) or nominalization, the beyond of the *symplochè* binding the nouns and the verbs by playing the game of essence, that beyond leaves a chain of traces, an other *symplochè* already "within" the title, *beyond essence*, yet without allowing itself to be included, rather deforming the curvature of its natural edges [*bords*].)

You have just heard the "present" of the "Here I am" freed for the other and declined before any declension. That "present" was already very

complicated in its structure, one could say almost contaminated by that very thing from which it should have been rent. It is not the presumed signatory of the work, E. L., who says: "Here I am," me, presently. He *quotes* a "Here I am," he thematizes what is nonthematizable (to use that vocabulary to which he will have assigned a regular—and somewhat strange—conceptual function in his writings). But beyond the Song of Songs or Poem of Poems, the citation of whoever would say "Here I am" should serve to mark out *this* extradition when responsibility for the other gives me over to the other. No grammatical marking as such, no language or context would suffice to determine it. That present-quotation, which, as a quotation, seems to efface the present event of any irreplaceable "here I am," also comes *to say* that in "here I am" the self is no longer presented as a self-present subject, making itself present to itself (I-myself), it is declined before all declension, "in the accusative," and he

— He or she, if the interruption of the discourse is required. Isn't it "she" in the Song of Songs? And who would "she" be? Does it matter?

Nearly always with him, this is how he sets his work in the fabric: by interrupting the weaving of our language and then by weaving together the interruptions themselves, another language comes to disturb the first one. It doesn't inhabit it, but haunts it. Another text, the text of the other, arrives in silence with a more or less regular cadence, without ever appearing in its original language, to dislodge the language of translation, converting the version, and refolding it while folding it upon the very thing [30] it pretended to import. It disassimilates it. But then, that phrase translated and quoted from the Song of Songs which, it should be recalled, is already a response, and a response that is more or less fictitious in its rhetoric, and what is more, a response meant in turn to be *quoted*, transmitted, and communicated in indirect discourse—this gives the accusative its greatest grammatical plausibility (various translations render it more or less exactly: "I opened to my beloved; / but my beloved had gone away, he had disappeared. / I was outside myself when he spoke to me. . . . I called him and he did not reply. . . . They have taken away my veil, the guards of the walls. / I implore you, daughters of Jerusalem / If you find my beloved, / What will you say to him? . . . / That I am sick of love." Or again "I open myself to my darling / but my darling has slipped away, he has passed. / My being goes out at his speaking: / I seek him and do not find him. / I call him: he does not reply. . . . On me they take away my shawl, / the guardians of the ramparts. / I appeal to you, daughters of Yeroushalaïm: if you find my darling, what will you declare to him? /— That sick of love, I . . ."), that phrase translated and quoted (in a footnote, so as to open up and deport the principal text); it is torn from the mouth of a woman, so as to be given to the other. Why doesn't he clarify that in this work?

— Doubtless because that remains in this context, and with regard to his most urgent purpose, secondary. Here, at least, he doesn't seem to answer that question. In the passage that quotes the "here I am," which I have in turn read to you, the structure of the utterances is complicated by the "astriction to giving." What is quoted here is what no quotation should be able to muffle; what is each time said only once, and henceforth exceeds not the saying but the said in language. The phrase describes or says what within the said interrupts it and at one stroke makes it anachronistic with respect to the saying, negotiated between the said and the saying and at the same time interrupting the negotiation while forthwith negotiating interruption itself. Such negotiation deals with a language, with the ordering of a grammar and a lexicon, with a system of normative constraints, which tend to interdict what here *must be said* (*il faut dire*), namely the astriction to giving and the extradition of subjectivity to the other. The negotiation thematizes what forbids thematization, while during the very trajectory of that transaction it forces language into a contract with the stranger, with what it can only incorporate without assimilating. With a nearly illegible stroke the other stands the contaminating negotiation up (*fait faux-bond*), furtively marking the effraction with a saying unreduced to silence although no longer *said in language*. The grammatical utterance is there, but dislodged so as to leave room for (though not to establish residence in) a sort of agrammaticality of the gift assigned from the other: *I* in the accusative, etc. The interdictory language [31] is interdicted but continues speaking; it can't help it, it can't avoid being continually and strangely interrupted and disconcerted by what traverses it with a single step, drawing it along while leaving it in place. Whence the essential function of a quotation, its unique setting to work, which consists in quoting the unquotable so as to lay stress on the language, citing it as a whole in order to summon *at once* as witness and as accused within its limits, (sur)rendered to a gift, as a gift to which language cannot open up on its own. It is not, then, simply a matter of transgression, a simple passage beyond language and its norms. It is not, then, a thought of the limit, at least not of that limit all too easily figured forth by the word "beyond" so necessary for the transaction. The passage beyond language requires language or rather a text as a place for the trace of a step that is not (present) elsewhere. That is why the movement of that trace, passing beyond language, is not classical nor does it render the *logos* either secondary or instrumental. *Logos* remains as indispensable as the fold folded onto the gift, just like the tongue (*langue*) of my mouth when I tear bread from it to give it to the other. It is also my body.

The description of this discursive structure could be further refined, but it doesn't matter much. Whatever the complications, the example we have just encountered remains held within quite strict limits. Which? Due to the (in some manner) first order quotationality of the "here I am," which is not the glib exhibition of the self but the unreserved exposition of its secret staying

secret, the presumed signatory, E. L., does not directly say *I* in the text. He does speak of the "I think," to be sure otherwise, and sometimes the indecision as to whether he says "I" or the "I," myself or the self, remains undecidable (for example: "The identity of the subject is here accused, not by a self-repose but by an unease that chases me out of the nucleus of my substantiality." Earlier in the same text he writes: "I have always been at issue: persecuted. Ipseity, in its passivity without the *arche* of identity, is hostage. The word *I* means *here I am*, answering for everything and everybody" [AE 145; OB 114]), according to a rhetoric that may appear traditional within philosophical discourse. But nothing in the discourse you have listened to *remarks* upon a certain present of the scription, at this very moment, the phenomenal maintenance of writing, the "I say now (*maintenant*) that I say (the Saying)" or "I write now that I write (the Saying)," which you are at this very moment reading. At least it is not thematized. When that comes about, and it does, the protocols will have to be further complicated, the protocols of the negotiation with the contagious or contaminant powers of a reappropriative language, of the language of the Same, strange or allergic to the Other. And one will then have to produce or recognize therein the symptoms of that allergy, particularly when something like a "this is what is going on at this moment," "that's what I mean [32] and how I say it in this work," "that's how I write certain of my books," comes to describe the law of that negotiation and by the same stroke to interrupt, *not without* recounting, the interruption. For that negotiation is not merely a negotiation like any other. It negotiates the nonnegotiable and not with just any partner or adversary, but with The negotiation itself, with the negotiating power that believes itself able to negotiate everything. *This* negotiation (which passively and one would almost say idly interrupts the negotiating activity, which denies it by a double negation) should negotiate the treatment of the nonnegotiable so as to keep (*garder*) its chance for it, that is to say so that it gives and does not keep itself intact like the same.

Here is an example (I will limit myself to a few examples, taking into account the economy regulated at this very moment by the time of writing, the mode of composition, and the editorial facture of this work [*ouvrage*] here). Listen:

But the reason of justice, the State, thematization, synchronization, of the re-presentation of logos and of being, doesn't it manage *to absorb within its coherence the intelligibility of that proximity in which it blossoms?* Must one not subordinate proximity to coherence, since the very discourse we are holding *at this moment* [my italics, J. D.] counts by what is *Said*, since, in thematizing, we synchronize the terms, form a system among them, use the verb to be, place within *being* whatever signification pretends to signify beyond being? Or must we recall alternation and diachrony as the time of philosophy. . . .

And a little further on, the following, where you will notice around the "at this very moment" the metaphor of the *retied thread* (*fil renoué*). This metaphor belongs to a very singular fabric, a relation (this time in the sense of a *récit*, a narrative, a relation of the same which resumes [*repren*d] the interruption of the Relation to the Other within its knots) by which the philosophical *logos* reappropriates itself, resumes into its web the history of all its ruptures:

Every contesting and interruption of this power of discourse is at once related by the discourse. Thus it recommences as soon as one interrupts it. . . . This discourse will be affirmed to be coherent and one. In relating the interruption of discourse or my being ravished by it, I retie its thread. . . . And are we not *at this very moment* [my italics, J. D.] in the process of barring up the exit which our whole essay is attempting, thus encircling our position from all sides? The exceptional words by which the trace of the past and the extravagance of the approach are said—One, God—become terms, rejoin the vocabulary, and are put at the disposal of philosophers instead of unseating philosophical language. Their very explosions are recounted. . . . Thus signifies the inextricable equivocity woven by language.

(AE 215; OB 169)

Within the question just posed ("And are we not at this very moment . . ."), the "at this very moment" would constitute the enveloping form or web of a text resuming without end all its tears within itself. But two pages later, the same "at this very [33] moment," otherwise said within the text, caught within another enchainning-unchainning, says something wholly other, namely, that "at this very moment" the interruptive breakthrough has taken place, ineluctable *at the very moment* when the discursive relation, the philosophical *récit*, pretends to reappropriate for itself the tear within the continuum of its texture:

. . . the intervals are not recuperated. The discourse which suppresses the interruptions of discourse in relating them together, does it not maintain the discontinuity behind the knots where the thread is retied?

The interruptions of discourse, recovered and related within the immanence of the said, are conserved as the knots in a retied thread, the tracing of a diachrony which does not enter into the present, refusing itself to simultaneity.

But the ultimate discourse, where all the discourses are uttered, I still interrupt it, in telling it to he who listens and is situated outside the Said which discourse says, outside all that discourse embraces. Which is true of the discourse I am in the process of holding *at this very moment* [my italics, J. D.]. This reference to the interlocutor permanently pierces the text that discourse pretends to weave in thematising and enveloping

all things. In totalising being, discourse as *Discourse* belies the very pretension to totalise.

At a two-page interval, an interval which neither can nor should be reduced, that here constitutes an absolutely singular seriality, the same "at this very moment" seems to repeat itself only to be dis-lodged without return. The "same" "very" (*le "même" du "même"*) of the "at this very moment" has remarked upon its own alteration, one which will have ever since opened it up to the other. The "first" one, which formed the element of reappropriation in the continuum, will have been *obligated* by the "second," the other one, the one of interruption, even before being produced, and in order to be produced. It will have constituted a text and context with the other, but only within a series where the text coheres with its own (if this may still be said) tear. The "at this very moment" only coheres with itself by means of an immeasurable anachrony incommensurable with itself. The singular textuality of this "series" does not enclose the Other but on the contrary opens itself up to it from out of irreducible difference, the past before any present, before any present moment, before anything we think we understand when we say "at this very moment."

This time, the "at this very moment" quoted in the meanwhile (recited or quoted again from one page to the next in order to mark the interruption of the *récit*) will not, as in the earlier "here I am," have been a quotation. Its iteration—for it is iterable and iterated in the series—is not of the same type. If language is there *at once used and mentioned* (as the theoreticians of *speech acts* would say), the mention is not of the same type as that of the "here I am" that earlier found itself quoted as well, in the traditional sense of the term. It is thus a strange event. The words there describe (constate) [34] and produce (perform) undecidably a written and a writing immediately implying the "I-now-here" of the scriptor. That strange event holds within itself a serial repetition, but it is repeated later once again, as a series, regularly. For example, it is repeated at the end of "Le nom de Dieu d'après quelques textes Talmudiques." The expression "at this very moment" or "at this moment" appears there twice within a three-line interval, the second one appearing as the deliberate if not strictly citational resumption of the first. The calculated allusion remarks there, in any case, the *same moment* (each time it is now) and the same expression, although from one moment to the next the same moment is no longer the same. But if it is no longer the same, it is not, as in the chapter on "Sense-Certainty" in Hegel's *Phenomenology*, due to time having passed (after writing down *das Jetzt ist die Nacht*), so that the now is now no longer the same. It is due, rather, to something else, to the thing as Other. Listen:

Responsibility which, before the discourse bearing on the *said*, is probably the essence of language.

(I cut across my reading to admire this “probably”: it contains nothing empirical or approximative, it removes no rigor from the utterance it determines. As ethical responsibility [ethics before ontology], the essence of language doesn’t belong to discourse about the *said*, which can only determine certainties. Here essence does not define the being of what is but of what should be or will have been, which cannot be proved within the language of being-present in the language of essence insofar as it suffers no improbability. Even though language can also be that which, bringing back to presence, to the same, to the economy of being, etc., has not *surely* got its essence in that responsibility responsive [to and for] the other as a past which will never have been present, nevertheless it “is” such responsibility that sets language in motion. Without that [ethical] responsibility there would be no language, but it *is never sure* that language surrenders itself to the responsibility that makes it possible [surrenders to its simply probable essence]: it may always [and to a certain extent it is probably even ineluctable that it will] betray it, tending to enclose it within the same. This liberty of betrayal must be allowed in order for language to be rendered back to its essence, which is the ethical. For once, for a unique time, essence is freed for probability, risk, and uncertainty. From this point on the essence of essence remains to be rethought in accordance with responsibility for the other, etc.)

It will of course be objected that if any other relation than thematisation may exist between the Soul and the Absolute, then would not the act of talking and thinking about it *at this very moment* [my italics, J. D.], the fact of enveloping it in our dialectic, mean that language and dialectic are superior with respect to that Relation?

But the language of thematisation, which *at this* [35] *moment* [my italics, J. D.] we are using, has perhaps only been made possible itself by means of that Relation, and is only ancillary.

A “perhaps” (“has perhaps only been made possible”) still affects this assertion: yet it nonetheless concerns a condition of possibility, the very thing philosophy subtracts from every “perhaps.” This is consonant with the earlier “probably,” and the “only” making possible is to be read also, perhaps, in two ways: (1) It has *not* been made *possible* except by that Relation (classical form of a statement on a condition of possibility); (2) It has only been rendered *possible* (probable), a reading that better corresponds with the ordinary syntactic order, and with the insecurity of a *perhaps*.

You will have noticed that the two occurrences of “at this moment” are inscribed and interpreted, drawn along according to two different gestures. In the first case, the present moment is determined from the movement of a present thematization, a presentation that pretends to encompass within itself the Relation which yet exceeds it, pretends to exceed it, precede it, and overflow it. That first “moment” makes the other return to the same.

But the other, the second "moment," if it is rendered possible by the excessive relation, is no longer nor shall it ever have been, a present "same." Its "same" is (will have been) dislocated by the very same thing which will have (probably, perhaps) been its "essence," namely, the Relation. It is in itself anachronic, in itself disparate, it no longer closes in upon itself. It is not what it is, in that strange and only probable essence, except by allowing itself beforehand to be opened up and deported by the Relation which makes it possible. The Relation *will have* made it possible—and, by the same stroke, impossible as presence, sameness, and assured essence.

To be more precise: between the two occurrences of "at this moment," the link is not one of distinction. It is the "same" moment which is each time repeated and divided each time in its link to its own essence, in its link to the responsibility that makes it possible. In the first case, E. L. thematizes the thematization that envelops, covers up, and dissimulates the Relation. In the second case, E. L. thematizes the nonthematizable of a Relation that does not allow further envelopment within the tissue of the same. But although, between the two "moments," there is a chronological, logical, rhetorical, and even an ontological interval—to the extent that the first belongs to ontology while the second escapes it in making it possible—it is nevertheless the *same moment*, written and read in its difference, in its double difference, one belonging to dialectic and the other different from and deferring from (*différant*) the first, infinitely and in advance overflowing it. The second moment has an infinite advance on the first. And yet it is the same.

But there must be a *series*, a beginning of a series of that "same" (at least two occurrences) in order for the writing that dislocates the Same toward the Relation to have a hold and a chance. E. L. would have been unable to make understandable the *probable* essence of language without that [36] singular repetition, without that citation or recitation which makes the Same come (*venir*) to rather than returning (*revenir*) to the Other. I said a "chance" because one is never constrained, even when obligated, to read what is thus rendered legible. Certainly, it appears clear, and clearly said, that, in the second occurrence, the "at this moment" which determines the language of thematization finds itself, one cannot say determined any longer, but disturbed from its normal signification of presence, by that Relation which makes it possible by opening (having opened) it up to the Other, outside of the theme, outside presence, beyond the circle of the Same, beyond Being. Such an opening doesn't open something (that would have an identity) to something else. Perhaps it isn't even an opening, but what bids (*ordonne*) to the Other, from out of the order of the other, a "this very moment" which can no longer return to itself. But nothing forces us to read it like that. It can always be interpreted without passing beyond, the beyond here not opening out to anyone or anything at all. The second "at this very moment" can always be made to return to the first, enveloping it anew,

ignoring the series effect or reducing it to a homogeneous concept of seriality, ignoring what this seriality bears of the singularly other and of the out-of-series (*hors-série*). Everything would then return to the same.

But what does that mean? That the dialectic of the first moment would triumph? Not even that. The Relation will have taken place anyway, will have already made possible the relation (as a *récit* of the interruptions) which pretends to sew everything up again within the discursive text. Everything would return to the same but the same could as well already be the other, the one of the second "at this very moment," the one—probably—of responsibility. It follows that the responsibility in question is not merely said, named, thematized, in one or other occurrence of "this moment," it is first of all yours, the one of reading to which "this moment" is given, confided, or delivered over. Your reading is thus no longer merely a simple reading that deciphers the sense of what is already found in the text; it has a limitless (ethical) initiative. It is freely self-obligated from the text of the Other, whose text one could abusively say today, wrongly, today that it *produces* it. But that it is freely self-obligated in no way signifies any autonomy. To be sure, you are the author of the text you read here, that can be said, but you remain within an absolute heteronomy. You are responsible for the other, who makes you responsible. *Who will have obligated you.* And even if you don't read *as one must*, as E. L. says one must read, still, beyond the dominant interpretation (that of domination) integral to the philosophy of grammar and to the grammar of philosophy, the Relation of dislocation *will have taken place*, there is nothing you can do about it, and unwittingly you will have read what will have made only possible, from out of the Other, what is happening "at this very moment."

That is the strange force of a text which frees itself to you without apparent defense, a force not that of the written, to be sure, in the current sense of the term, which obligates the written in simply making it possible. The [37] disturbance which it *refers* (the Relation it relates to the other in linking to it the *récit*) is never assured, perceptible, or *demonstrable*: neither a demonstrative conclusion nor a phenomenal showing. By definition it is not a controllable disturbance, it is not readable within the *inside* of logic, semiotics, language, grammaticality, lexicon, or rhetoric with their supposedly internal criteria, because nothing is less certain than the rigorous limits of such an inside.

That internal element must have been holed or broken through (to the light of day), torn, even *more than once*, in more or less regular fashion, so that the regularity of the tear (I would say the *strategy* of the tear if this word, strategy, did not betoken too much—for him, not for me—toward economic calculation, the ruse of a stratagem and warring violence at the very point when on the contrary everything must be so calculated that calculation should not have the last word [*avoir raison de*] over everything) may have obligated you to receive the order which is gently given to you,

confided to you, in order to read thus and not otherwise, to read *otherwise* and not thus. What I would like to give you here (to read, think, love, eat, drink, whatever you wish) is what he himself will have given, and how he gives "at this very moment." The gesture is very subtle, almost unapparent. Because of what's at stake it must remain almost unapparent, merely probable, not so as to be decisive (which it must rather avoid being) but in order to respond to chance before the Other. Hence the second "at this moment," the one that gives its time to this language that "has perhaps only been made possible by that Relation" to the other of all presence, is nothing other than the first, it is the same in the language, he repeats it a few lines further on and its reference remains the same. Yet everything will have changed, sovereignty will have become ancillary. The first "moment" gave its form or its temporal place, its "presence," to a thought, a language, a dialectic "sovereign in regard to that Relation." So what will have happened—probably, perhaps—is this: the second "moment" will have forced the first toward its own condition of possibility, toward its "essence," beyond the Said and the Theme. It will have in advance—but after the fact within the serial rhetoric—torn the envelope. But that very tear would not have been possible without a certain hooking back (*échancrure*) of the second moment and a sort of analogical contamination between the two, a relation between two incommensurables, a relation between the relation as ontological *récit* and the Relation as responsibility for the Other.

Apparently he likes the tear (*déchirure*) but detests contamination. Yet what holds his writing in suspense is that one must welcome contamination, the *risk* of contamination, in enchainning the tears and regularly *resuming* them within the philosophical text or tissue of a *récit*. This *resumption* is even the condition upon which what is beyond essence may keep (*garder*) its chance against the enveloping seam of the thematical or dialectical. The tear must be saved, for [38] which one must play off seam against seam. The risk of contamination must be regularly accepted (in series) in order to leave its chance to the noncontamination of the other by the rule of the same. His "text" (and I would even say *the* text without wishing to efface an irreplaceable idiom) is always that heterogeneous tissue that interlaces both texture and atexture, without uniting them. And whoever (as was written elsewhere of an other, very close and very distant) "ventures to plot the absolute tear, absolutely tears his own tissue, once more become solid and servile in once more giving itself to be read." I propose this rapprochement without complacency, in order to try to think a necessity: one which, although unformalizable, regularly reproduces the relation of the formalizable to the nonformalizable.

The "metaphors" of seam and tear obsess his text. Is it merely a matter of "metaphors," once they envelop or tear the very element (the text) of the metaphorical? It matters little for the moment. In any case they seem to be organized as follows. Let us call by one word, *interruption* (which he uses

often), that which regularly puts an end to the authority of the Said, the thematical, the dialectical, the same, the economical, etc., whatever is demarcated from this series so as to go beyond essence: to the Other, toward the Other, from the Other. The interruption will have come to tear the continuum of a tissue which naturally tends to envelop, shut in upon itself, sew itself back up again, mend, resume its own tears, and to make it appear as if they were still its own and could return to it. For example, in "Le Nom de Dieu," the first "moment" gathers together the continuum of a tissue that "envelops" the beyond in the same and forbids the interruption. Now, in the following phrase, yet still within the language of thematization, the other moment, the moment of the Other, marks the instance of the tear by a Relation which *will have made* "only possible" the continuum itself, that will therefore not have been (or have come to be) the continuum it seemed to be. The absolutely future anterior of that tear—as an absolutely past anterior—will have made possible the effect of the seam. And not vice versa. But only on the condition of letting itself be contaminated, resumed, and sewn up within what it has made possible. It follows that the resumption is not any more logical than the interruption. *Otherwise than Being*:

Are the tears in the logical text, sewn up again by logic alone? It is in the association of philosophy and the State, philosophy and medicine, that the rupture of discourse is surmounted. The interlocutor who does not yield himself to logic is threatened either with imprisonment or internment, or is submitted to the prestige of the master and the medication of the doctor. . . . It is by means of the State that Reason and knowledge are forceful and efficient. But the State discounts neither irrevocable madness nor even intervals of madness. It doesn't untie the knots, it cuts them. The Said thematises the interrupted dialogue or the dialogue delayed by silences, by failures or by delirium; but the intervals are not recuperated. The discourse which suppresses the interruptions by relating [39] them, does it not maintain the discontinuity under the knots which retie the thread? The interruptions of discourse, found and related within the immanence of the said, are conserved as though in the knots of a retied thread, trace of a diachrony which does not enter into the present, refusing itself to simultaneity.

Whether it severs or reties, the discourse of philosophy, medicine, or the State retains the trace of interruption despite itself. Despite itself. Yet in order to re-mark the interruption, which is what E. L.'s writing does, one must *also* retie the thread, despite oneself, within the book not left intact by philosophy, medicine, or the logic of the State. The analogy between the book, philosophy, medicine, logic, and the State is very strong. "Interrupted discourse recapturing its own ruptures—this is the book. But books have their destinies, they belong to a world they do not englobe but acknowledge

by writing and imprinting themselves within it, allowing themselves to be pre-facéd and preceded by some introduction. They interrupt themselves, calling forth other books in the final count interpreting each other in a saying distinct from the said."

So he writes books that should not be books of State (of philosophy, medicine, or logic). How does he do it? In his books, as in those of others, the interruption leaves its marks, but otherwise. Knotted threads are formed in it, recapturing the tears, but otherwise. They allow the discontinuous to appear in its trace, but since the trace is not to be reassembled into its appearance, it can always resemble the trace which discontinuity leaves within the logical discourse of the State, of philosophy, or of medicine. The trace should therefore "present" itself there, without presenting itself, *otherwise*. But how? *This* book (*livre*) here, the one composed of *his* books beyond all totality, how is it freed (*comment se livre-t-il*) otherwise to the other? From one moment to the next, the difference must have been infinitely subtle, the one recapturing the other in its meshes (*mailles*) must leave another trace of the interruption in its meshes, and by thematizing the trace make another knot (left to the discretion of the other in the reading). But another knot remains insufficient; what is needed is another chain of multiple knots having the peculiarity that they do not tie together continuous threads (as a State book pretends to do) but retie cut threads while keeping the hardly apparent trace (perhaps, probably) of absolute interruptions, of the absolute as interruption. The trace of this interruption within the knot is never simply visible, sensible, or assured. That trace does not belong to discourse and only comes to it from the Other. That is also true of State discourse, to be sure, but here, nonphenomenality must obligate us, without constraint, to read the trace as trace, the interruption as interruption according to an *as such* no longer appropriable as a phenomenon of essence. The structure of the knot must be other, although it resembles it quite a lot. You are never required to read or recognize the trace of interruption, it only comes about through you for whom it is freed, and yet he will have, wholly otherwise, obligated you to read what one is not obligated to read. Unlike [40] everyone, the State, philosophy, medicine, he doesn't simply make knots and interruptions in his text. I say like everyone, since if there is interruption everywhere, there are knots everywhere. But there is in his text, perhaps, a supplementary nodal complication, another way of retying without retying.

How is this supplement of the knot to be figured? It must enchain together the knots in such a way that the text holds together, but also that the interruptions "remain" ("*restent*") *numerous* (one alone is never enough): not merely as a present, apparent, or substantial remainder (*restance*), which would merely be another way for the supplementary knot to disappear, but tracing out in passing by to leave more opportunity for the trace of the other. Now to achieve that, one sole knot, keeping the trace of one sole interruption, would not suffice, nor one chain exhibiting the trace of a

sole hiatus. One sole interruption in a discourse does not do its work and thus allows itself to be immediately reappropriated. The hiatus must insist, whence the necessity of the *series*, of the series of knots. The absolute paradox (of the ab-solute) is that *this series*, incommensurable with any other, series out-of-series, does not tie up threads but the interruptions between threads, traces of intervals which the knot should only remark, give to be remarked. I have chosen to name this structure by the word *series* so as to tie together, in my turn, *series* (file, sequence, range, consequence, ordered enchainment of a regular multiplicity, interlacing, line descendance) and *seira* (cord, chain, lasso, lace, etc.). We will accept the chance of finding in the net of the same lineage at least one of four Latin *seros* (to interlace, plait, enchain, reattach) and the Greek *eiro* which says (or ties) together the interlacing of lace and saying, the *symplokè* of discourse and binding. This ab-solute series is *without a single knot*, but ties a multiplicity of retied knots, and does not re-tie threads but the interruptions without thread, leaving open the interruptions between interruptions. This interruption is not a cut (*coupure*) nor does it fall under a logic of the cut, but rather that of ab-solute de-stricturation. That is why the opening of interruption is never pure. And in order to distinguish itself, for instance, from the discontinuous as a symptom within the discourse of the State or of the book, it can break its resemblance only by being *not just any* interruption, and thus also by determining itself within the element of the same. *Not just any*: here is situated the enormous responsibility of a work—within the State, philosophy, medicine, economy, etc. And the risk is ineluctable, it is inscribed in the *necessity* (another word for speaking about the bond one cannot cut) of stricture, the necessity of enchaining the moments, be they of rupture, and of negotiating the chain, albeit in nondialectical fashion. This risk is itself regularly thematized in his text. For example, concerning precisely the opening: “How is one to think the opening onto the *other than being* without that opening as such signifying at once a gathering in conjunction, in the unity of essence in which the subject would at once get bogged down, the very subject to which this gathering would unveil itself, the bond [41] *with* essence immediately tightening itself up *within* the intimacy of essence?” etc. (OB).

There are thus many ways of enchaining together the interruptions and the passages beyond essence, enchaining them not simply *within* the logic of the same, but in the contact (in the contact without contact, in proximity) of the same with the Other; there are many ways of confecting such an inextricable mesh rather than another, since the risk has to do with their not all being equivalent. There a philosophy, or an aesthetics, a rhetoric, a poetics, a psychagogy, an economy, a politics still remains to be negotiated: between, if this could still be said, the before and the beyond. With a vigilance one could probably say was operating at every instant, in order to save the interruption without, by safe-keeping it, losing it all the more, without

the fatality of retying coming to interrupt structurally the interruption, E. L. takes calculated risks in this regard, risks as calculated as possible. But how does he calculate? How does the Other calculate in him so as to leave room for the incalculable? What mill have been the style of this calculation, if one may call style this idiom which marks the negotiation with a singular and irreplaceable seal? And what if the pledges he will give to the other of the Other, which will make of himself, according to his work, a hostage, are no longer absolutely replaceable?

What I here call the risk of obligated negotiation (since if the interruption is not negotiated, it is even more surely interrupted, abandoning the non-negotiable to the marketplace), that toward which his attention is perhaps incessantly drawn, in the extreme, is what he himself also calls the inevitable "concession" ("Go beyond"—that is to already make a concession to theoretical and ontological language, as if the *beyond* were still a term or an entity or a mode of being, or the negative counterweight of all that" [OB]), the always threatening risk of "betrayal" (AE 214; OB 168) or of "contamination" ("there you have the propositions of this book, which names the *beyond essence*. A notion which certainly could not pretend originality, but whose access has lost none of its ancient steepness. The difficulties of the ascent—and of its failures and resummptions—are inscribed within a writing which doubtless also attests to the breathlessness of the searcher. But, to *hear to a God uncontaminated by Being* is a human possibility no less important or precarious than to *draw Being from the forgetfulness*, into which it would have fallen in metaphysics and onto-theology" [AE x; OB xlii; see also ND 160]). Yielding on the one hand to the arbitrary, that of an example in a series, and on the other to the economy of the discourse I am enchainning here, let us thematize "contamination." Usually it implies the stain or poisoning by the contagion of some improper body. Here simple contact would suffice, since it will have interrupted the interruption. Contact would be a priori contaminating. Graver yet, the risk of contamination would surface even *before* contact, in the simple *necessity of tying* together interruptions as such, in the [42] very seriality of traces and the insistence on rupture. And even if that unheard of chain does not retie threads but hiatuses. Contamination then is no longer a risk but a fatality that must be assumed. The knots in the series contaminate without contact, as if the two edges established continuity at a distance by the simple vis-à-vis of their lines. Still, it is no longer a matter of edges since there is no longer any line, only filed points absolutely disjoint from one shore to the other of the interruption.

Once tied, the point of each thread remains without contact with the other, but the contamination will have taken place between the (internal and external) borders, between the two points of the same and the other that have been linked together, the one maintaining (*maintenant*) the other within the diachrony of the "moment."

The lace of obligation is in place. It is not a trap; I have previously said why. Its incomparable stricture contaminates one obligation by another, the one that unbinds by the one that binds, yet without reciprocity. Playing—but scarcely, perhaps—one could say that the obligation binds and unbinds. He will have obligated: bound and unbound, bound in unbinding “together,” in the “same” *seriasure* (*sériature*) in the same dia-synchrony, in a serial *at once*, the “many times” that will have taken place only once. He will have bound/unbound an obligation that obligates, a *religion*, and an ob-ligation that un-binds without merely raising an ob-stacle or ob-jection to the ligature, that opens up religion within the very unbinding.

This lace of obligation holds language. It maintains it, preventing it from falling apart in passing through the eyelets of a texture: alternatively inside and outside, below and above, before and beyond. It does it in measure, regularly tightening the body into its form. It is in allowing this lace to be made that he will have obligated.

But who, “he”? Who says the “*one must*” of this obligation that is made into a fault so as to be freed up to your discretion?

Here now is another example. He speaks of “this book,” even here, of the fabrication of “this work,” of the “present work,” these expressions repeat themselves as with the above “at this moment,” but this time interlaced with a series of “one musts.” A “me” and “here I am” slide incessantly from the quotation to an interminable oscillation between “use” and “mention.” This happens in the last two pages of *Otherwise than Being* (chapter 6: “Outside”). I select the following, not without some artificial abstraction: “Signification—one-forthe-other—relation with alterity—has already been analysed in the *present work* [my italics, J. D.] as proximity, proximity as responsibility for the Other (*autrui*), and responsibility for the Other—as substitution: in its subjectivity, in its very bearing as separated substance, the subject has shown itself as expiation-for-the-other, condition or uncondition of hostage.” I interrupt for an instant; “in the *present work*” the impresentable has therefore presented itself, a relation with the Other (*Autre*) that defeats any gathering into presence, to the point where no “work” can be rebound or shut in upon its presence, nor plotted or enchained [43] in order to form a book. The present work makes a present of what can only be given outside the book. And even outside the framework. “The problem overflows the framework of this book.” These are the last words of the last chapter of *Totality and Infinity* (immediately before the conclusion). But what overflows has just been announced—it is the very announcement, messianic consciousness—on the internal border of that utterance, on the *frame* of the book if not *in* it. And yet what is wrought and set to work in the present work only makes a work outside the book. The expression “in the present work” mimics the thesis and the code of the university community; it is ironic. It has to be so as discretely as possible, for there would still be too great an assurance and too much glibness to break the code with

a fracas. Effraction does not ridicule, it indeed makes a present of the "present work."

Let's continue: "This book interprets the *subject* as *hostage*, and the subjectivity of the subject as substitution breaking with the *essence* of being. The thesis exposes itself imprudently to the reproach of utopianism, in the opinion that modern man takes himself for a being among beings, while his modernity explodes as an impossibility of staying at home. This book escapes the reproach of utopianism—if utopianism be a reproach, if thought can escape being utopian—by recalling that "*what humanely took place has never been able to remain shut in its place.*" "*The thesis*" is therefore not posed, it is imprudently and defenselessly exposed, and yet that very vulnerability is ("this weakness is necessary," we will read a little later on) the provocation to responsibility for the other, it leaves place for the other in a taking-place of *this* book where the *this here* no longer shuts in upon itself, upon its own subject. The same dehiscence that opened up the series of "at this moment," is there at work in "the present work," "this book," "the thesis," etc. But the series is always complicated by the fact that the inextricable equivocation, contamination, soon it will be called "hypocrisy," is at once described and denounced in its necessity by "this book," by "the present work," by "the thesis," and *in* them, out of them, in them, but destined in them to an outside that no dialectic will be able to reappropriate into its book. Thus (I underline *it is necessary* [*il faut*], *it was necessary* [*il fallait*]):

Each individual is virtually an elect, called forth to leave, in his turn—or without awaiting his turn—from the concept of the self, from his extension into the people, to respond to responsibility: *me* that is to say, *here I am for the others*, called forth radically to lose his place—or his refuge within being, to enter within a ubiquity that is also a utopia. Here I am for the others—e-normous responsibility whose lack of measure is attenuated by hypocrisy from the moment it enters into my own ears, warned, as they are, of the *essence* of being, that is to say, of the way in which it carries on. Hypocrisy immediately denounced. But the norms to which the denunciation refers have been understood within the enormity of their sense, and in the full resonance of their utterance, true like an unbridled witness. *No less*, at any rate, *is necessary* for the little humanity that adorns the earth. . . . There must be [44] a de-regulation of essence by means of which essence may not solely find violence repugnant. This repugnance attests only to the phase of an inaugural or savage humanity, ready to forget its disgusts, to be invested as "essence of de-regulation," surrounding itself like all essence with honors and military virtues, inevitably jealous of its perseverance. For the little humanity that adorns the earth there must be a relaxing of essence to the second power: *in the just war made on war, to tremble—even shiver—every instant, because of that very justice.* There must be

this weakness. This relaxing of virility, without cowardice, *was necessary* for the little cruelty that our hands repudiate. This is the sense, notably, which should have been suggested by the formulas repeated in *this book* [my italics, J. D.] about the passivity more passive than any passivity, the fission of the Self as far as myself, or about the consummation for the other without the act being able to be reborn from out of the ashes of that consummation.

I again interrupt: no Hegelian Phoenix after this consummation. *This book* is not only singular in not being put together like the others, its singularity has to do with *this* seriality here, absolute enchainment, rigorous yet with a rigor that knows how to relax itself as is necessary so as not to become totalitarian again, even *virile*, hence to free itself to the discretion of the other in the hiatus. It is in this seriality here and not another (the array in its homogeneous arrangement), in this seriality of derangement that one must hear each philosopheme deranged, dislocated, disarticulated, made inadequate and anterior to itself, absolutely anachronistic to whatever is said about it, for example, "the passivity more passive than any passivity" and the whole "series" of analogous syntaxes, all the "formulas repeated in this book." Now you understand the necessity of this repetition. You thus approach the "he" ("il") which occurs in this work and from which the "one must" ("il faut") is said. Here are the last lines:

In this work [my italics, J. D.] which does not seek to restore any ruined concept, the destitution and de-situation of the subject do not remain without meaning: following the death of a certain god inhabiting the hinter-worlds, the substitution of the hostage discovers the trace—unpronounceable writing—of what, always already past, always "he" ("il") never enters any present and to whom no names designating beings, nor verbs where their *essence* resounds, are any longer appropriate, but who, Pro-noun (*Pro-nom*), marks with his seal anything that can carry a name.

— Will it be said of "this work" (*ouvrage*) that it makes a work? From which moment? Of what? Of whom? Whatever the stages may be, the responsibility comes back to him, "he," to him, who "*undersigns*" every signature. Pro-noun without pronounceable name that "marks with its seal whatever can carry a name." This last phrase comes at the end of the book as if in place of a signature. Emmanuel Levinas recalls [45] the preceding Pro-noun that replaces and makes possible every nominal signature, by the same double stroke, he gives to it and withdraws from it, his signature. Is it him, "he," that then is set to work? *Of him* that the work responds? Of him that one will have said, "Il aura obligé" (he will have obligated)? I do not think that between such a pro-noun and a name or the bearer of a

name there is what one could call a difference or a distinction. This link between "he" and the bearer of a name is other. Each time different, never anonymous, "*he*" is (without sustaining it with any substantial presence) the bearer of the name. If I now transform the utterance, which came from I know not where and from which we took our point of departure ("Il aura obligé"), by this one, "the work of Emmanuel Levinas will have obligated," would he subscribe to that? Would he accept my replacing "he" by Emmanuel Levinas in order to say (who) will have made the work in his work? Would it be a fault, as to "he" or as to him, E. L.?

—Now, I write at your dictation, "the work of E. L. will have obligated."

You have dictated it to me and yet what I write at this very moment, "the work of E. L. will have obligated," articulating together those common nouns and proper names, you don't yet know what that means. You don't know yet how *one must* read. You don't even know how, at this moment, *one must* hear this "one must" (*il faut*).

The work of E. L. *comprehends* an *other* manner to think obligation in the "one must," an *other* manner of thinking the work, and even of thinking thought. One must therefore read it otherwise, read there otherwise the "one must," and otherwise the otherwise.

The dislocation to which this work will have obligated is a dislocation without name; toward another thought of the name, a thought that is wholly other because it is open to *the name of the other*. Inaugural and immemorial dislocation, it will have taken place—another place, in the place of the other—only on the condition of another topic. An extravagant topic (u-topic, they will say, believing they know what takes place and what takes the place of) and absolutely other. But to hear the absolute of this "absolutely," one must have read the serial work that displaces, replaces, and substitutes this word "absolute." And to start with, the word "work." We endlessly get caught up in the network of quotation marks. We no longer know how to efface them, nor how to pile them up, one on top of the other. We no longer even know how to quote his "work" any longer, since it already quotes, under quotation marks, the whole language—French, Western, and even beyond—even if it is only from the moment and because of the fact that "he" must put in quotation marks, the pronominal signatory, the nameless signatory without authorial signature, "he" who undersigns every work, sets every work (*ouvrage*) to work (*met en oeuvre*), and "marks by his seal whatever can carry a name." If "he" is between quotation marks, nothing more can be said, [46] about him, for him, from him, in his place or before him, that wouldn't require a tightly knit, tied up, and wrought (*ouvragée*) series, a whole fabric of quotation marks knitting a text without edge. A text exceeding language and yet in all rigor untranslatable from one tongue to another. Seriality irreducibly knots it to a language.

If you wish to talk of E. L.'s operation when he sets himself into "this work" (*ouvrage*), when he writes "at this moment," and if you ask "What is he doing?" and "How does he do it?" then not only must you dis-locate the "he" who is no longer the subject of an operation, agent, producer or worker, but you must right away clarify that the Work, as his work gives and gives again to be thought is no longer of the technical or productive order of the operation (*poiein, facere, agere, tun, wirken, erzeugen*, or however it may be translated). You cannot therefore speak—pertinently—of the Work before what "his" work says of the Work, in its Saying and beyond its Said, because that gap (*écart*) remains irreducible. Nor is there any circle here, especially not a hermeneutic one, because the Work—according to his work—"is" precisely what breaks all circularity. There, near but infinitely distanced, the dislocation is to be found in the interior without inside of language which is yet opened out to the outside of the wholly other. The infinite law of quotation marks seems to suspend any reference, enclosing the work upon the borderless context which it gives to itself: yet behold here this law making absolute reference to the commandment of the wholly other, obligating beyond any delimitable context.

If, therefore, I now write "the work of E. L. will have obligated to an absolute dislocation," the obligation, as the work that teaches it, teaching also how one must teach, will have been without constraint, without contract, anterior to any engagement, to any nominal signature, which through the other responds for the other before any question or requisition, ab-solute thereby and ab-solving. "He" will have subtracted dissymmetrical responsibility from the circle, the circulation of the pact, the debt, acknowledgment, from synchronic reciprocity, I would even dare say from the annular alliance, from the *rounds (tour)*, from whatever makes a round from a finger and I dare say from a sex.

Can it be said? How difficult, probably impossible, to write or describe here what I seem on the verge of describing. Perhaps it is impossible to hold a discourse which holds itself at this moment, saying, explaining, constating (a constative discourse) E. L.'s work. There would have to be (*faudrait*) a writing that performs, but with a performative without present (who has ever defined such a performative?), one that would respond to his, a performative without a present event, a performative whose essence cannot be resumed as to presence ("at this very moment," at this *present* moment I write this, I say *I*, presently; and it has been said that the simple utterance of an *I* was already performative), a performative heretofore never described, whose performance must not, however, be experienced as a glib success, as an act of prowess. For at the same time it is [47] the most quotidian exercise of a discourse with the other, the condition of the least virtuoso writing. Such a performance does not correspond to (*répond à*) the canonical description of a performative, perhaps. Well then, let the description be changed, or renounce here the word "performative"! What is pretty certain

is that *that* performance derives nothing from the “constative” proposition, nor from any proposition at all; but inversely and dissymmetrically, every so-called constative proposition, every proposition in general *presupposes* this structure before anything else, this responsibility of the trace (*performing* or *performed*).

For example, I wrote earlier: “‘he’ will have withdrawn it from the circle. . . .” Now it would already be necessary—infinity—that I take back and displace each written word in series. Displacing being insufficient, I must rip away each word from itself, *absolutely* rip it away from it-self (as, for example, in his manner of writing “passivity more passive than passivity,” an expression which undetermines itself, can just as well pass into its opposite, unless the ripping off stops somewhere, as if by a piece of skin symbolically ripped off from the body and remaining, behind the cut, adhered to it), I must absolutely detach it and absolve it from itself while nevertheless leaving upon it a mark of attachment (the expression “passivity more passive than passivity,” does not just become any other expression, it does not mean “activity more active than activity”); in order that two annullments or two excesses not be equivalent, within indetermination, the ab-solving erasure must not be absolutely absolute. I must therefore make each atom of an utterance appear faulty and absolved; faulty in regard to what or whom? And why? When I write, for example, “‘he’ will have withdrawn it, etc.” the very syntax of my phrase, according to the dominant norms that interpret the French language, the “he” appears to be constituted into an active subject, author and initiator of an operation. If “he” were the simple pronoun of the signatory (and not the Pro-noun marking with its seal whatever may carry a name . . .), it could be thought that the signatory has the authority of an author, and that “he” is the agent of the action that “will have withdrawn,” etc. Now *it would have been necessary* (*aurait fallu*) to say, it must therefore be said, that “he” has withdrawn nothing whatever, “he” has *made appear* the possibility of that withdrawal, he has not *made* it appear, he has *let* it appear, he has not let it *appear*, since what he has let (not to be but to make a sign, and not a sign but an enigma), what he has let produce itself as enigma, and to produce itself is still too much, is not of the phenomenal order, he has “let” “appear” the non-appearing as such (but the non-appearing never dis-appears into its “as such,” etc.) on the limit of the beyond, a limit that is not a determinable, visible, or thinkable line, and that has no definable edges, on the “limit,” therefore, of the “beyond” of phenomena and of essence: that is to say (!) the “he” himself. That’s it, the “he” himself, that is to say (!), the Other. “He” has said “He,” even before “I” may say “I” and in order that, if that is possible, “I” may say “I.” [48]

That other “he,” the “he” as wholly other, was only able to arrive at the end of my phrase (unless my phrase never arrived, indefinitely arrested on its own linguistic shore [*rive*] by means of a series of words that are all

faulty, and that I have, as it were, erased in passing, in measure, regularly, the one after the other, while leaving to them the force of their tracing, the wake of their tracement (*tracement*), the force (without force) of a trace that will have allowed passage for the other. I have written in marking them, in letting them be marked, by the other. That is why it is inexact to say that I have erased those words. In any case, I should not have erased them, I should have let them be drawn into a *series* (a stringed sequence of enlaced *erasures*), an interrupted series, a *series* of interlaced interruptions, series of *hiatuses* (gaping mouth, mouth opened out to the cut-off word, or to the gift of the other and to the-bread-in-his-mouth) that I shall henceforth call, in order to formalize in economical fashion and so as not to dissociate what is not dissociable within this fabric, the *seriasure* (*sériature*). That other “he” could have only arrived at the end of my phrase within the interminable mobility of this seriasure. He is not the subject-author-signer-proprietor of the work (*ouvrage*); it is a “he” without authority. It could just as well be said that he is the Pro-noun leaving its presignature sealed under the name of the author, for example, E. L., or conversely that E. L. is but a pronoun replacing the singular pronoun, the seal that comes before whatever can carry a name. From this point of view, E. L. would be the *personal* pronoun of “he.” Without authority, he does not make a work, he is not the agent or creator of his work, yet if I say that he *lets* the work work (a word that remains to be drawn along), it must immediately be specified that this letting is not a simple passivity, not a letting of thought within the horizon of letting-be. This letting beyond essence, “more passive than passivity,” hear it as the most provocative thought today. It is not provocative in the sense of the transgressive, and glibly shocking, exhibition. It is a thought also provoked, *first of all* provoked. Outside the law as law of the other. It is only provoked from its absolute exposure to the provocation of the other, exposure stretched out with all possible force in order not to reduce the *past anterior* of the other, so as not to turn inside out the surface of the self who, *in advance*, finds itself delivered to it body and soul.

“Past anterior” (in the past, in the present past), “first of all,” “in advance”: amongst the words or syntax whose setting in seriasure I have not yet sketched, there is the future anterior, which I shall have nonetheless used frequently, having no alternative recourse. For example, in the little phrase “Il aura obligé,” or “the work of E. L. will have obligated” (Obligated to what? and who, in the first place? I have not yet said thou [*tu*], me, you [*vous*], us, them, they [*ils, elles*], it). The future anterior could turn out to be—and this resemblance is irreducible—the time of Hegelian teleology. Indeed, that is how the properly philosophical intelligence is usually administered, in accord with what [49] I called above the dominant interpretation of language—in which the philosophical interpretation precisely consists. Yet *here indeed* (*ici même*), within *this* seriasure drawn along the “Il aura obligé,” (he will have obligated), in this and not in another quite similar

seriasure, but determining otherwise the same utterance, the future anterior, "here indeed," will have designated "within" language that which remains most irreducible to the economy of Hegelian teleology and to the dominant interpretation of language. From the moment when it is in accord with the "he" as Pro-noun of the wholly-other "always already past," it will have drawn us toward an eschatology without philosophical teleology, beyond it in any case, otherwise than it. It will have engulfed the future anterior in the bottomless bottom of a past anterior to any past, to all present past, toward that past of the trace that has never been present. Its future anteriority will have been *irreducible* to ontology. An ontology, moreover, made in order to attempt this impossible reduction. This reduction is the finality of ontological movement, its power but also its fatality of defeat: what it attempts to reduce is its own condition.

That future anteriority *there* would no longer decline a verb saying the action of a subject in an operation that would have been *present*. To say "il aura obligé"—in *this* work, taking into account what sets things to work within *this* seriasure—is not to designate, describe, define, show, etc., but, let us say, to *entrace* (*entracer*), otherwise said to perform within the intr(el)acement (*entr(el)acement*) of a seriasure that obligation whose "he" will not have been the present subject but for which "I" hereby respond: Here I am, (I) come. *He* will not have been (a) present but he will have made a gift by not disappearing without leaving a trace. But leaving the trace is also to *leave* it, to abandon it, not to insist upon it in a sign. It is to efface it. In the concept of trace is inscribed in advance the re-treat (*re-trait*) of effacement. The trace is inscribed in being effaced and leaving the traced wake of its effacement (etc.) in the *retreat*, or in what E. L. calls the "superimposition." ("The authentic trace, on the other hand, disturbs the order of the world. It comes 'superimposed.' . . . Whoever has left traces in effacing his traces did not mean to say or do anything by the traces he left" [HH 60; CP 104.]) The structure of superimposition thus described menaces by its very rigor, which is that of contamination, any *authenticity* assured of its trace ("the authentic trace") and any rigorous dissociation between sign and trace. ("The trace is not a sign like any other. But it also plays the role of a sign. . . . Yet every sign, in this sense, is a trace," *ibid.*) The word "leave" (*laisser*) in the locution "leave a trace" now seems to be charged with the whole enigma. It would no longer announce itself starting from anything other than the trace, and especially not from a letting-be, unless letting-be be understood *otherwise*, following the sign the trace makes to it where it is allowed to be effaced.

What am I saying to you when I pronounce "leave me"? Or when you say "he has left me," or as in the Song of Songs, "he has slipped away, he has passed by"? [50]

Otherwise said (the serial enchainment should no longer slip through a "that is to say" but instead it should be interrupted and retied at the border

of the interruptions by an "otherwise said"), for this not-without-trace (*pas-sans-trace*), the contamination between the "he" beyond language and the "he" within the economic immanence of language and its dominant interpretation, is not merely an evil or a "negative" contamination, rather it describes the very process of the trace insofar as it makes a work, in a work-making (*faire-oeuvre*) that must neither be grasped by means of work nor of making, but instead by means of what is said of the work in his work, by the saying of the said, by its intr(el)aced performance. There is no more a "negative" contamination than there is a simple beyond or a simple inside of language, on the one side and the other of some border.

Once again you find the logical paradox of *this* seriesure (but this one in its irreplaceable singularity counts for every other): one must, even though nobody constrains anybody, read his work, otherwise said, respond to it and even respond for it, not by means of what one understands by *work* according to the dominant interpretation of language, but according to what *his* work says, *in its manner*, of Work, about what it is, otherwise said, about what it *should (be)*, otherwise said about it should have (to be), as work at work in the work.

That is its dislocation: the work does not deport some utterance, or series of utterances, it re-marks in each atom of the said a marking effraction of the saying, a saying no longer a present infinitive, but already a past of the trace, a performance (of the) wholly other. And if you wish to have access to "his" work, you will have to have passed by what it will have said of the Work, namely, that it does not return to him. That is why you have to respond for it, you. It is in your hands, that can give it to him, I will even say more—dedicate it to him. At this moment, indeed:

The Other can dispossess me of my work, take it or buy it, thus controlling my very conduct. I am exposed to instigation. The work is vowed to this foreign *Sinngebung* from its very origin in me. . . . Willing escapes the will. The work is always, in a certain sense, an unsuccessful act (*acte manqué*). I do not fully know what I want to do. Whence an unlimited field of investigation for psychoanalysis or sociology seizing the will in its apparition within the work, in its conduct and within its products."

(TeI 202–4; TI 227–28)

The Work, such as it is at work, *wrought*, in the work of E. L., as one should read it if one must read "his" work, does not return—from the origin—to the Same; which does not imply that it *signifies* waste or pure loss within a *game*. Such a game would still, in its waste, be determined by economy. The gratuity of this work, what he still calls *liturgy*, "a losing investment" (*"mise de fonds à perte"*), or "working without remuneration" (HH; CP), resembles playing a game but is not a game, "it is ethics itself,"

beyond even thinking and the thinkable. For the liturgy of work should not [51] even be *subordinated* to thinking. A work that would be “subordinated to thinking” (TTO and HH; CP) still understood as economic calculation, would not make a Work.

What E. L.’s work will therefore have succeeded in doing—in the unsuccessful act it claims to be, like any work—is to have obligated us, before all contract of acknowledgment, to this dissymmetry which it has itself so violently and gently provoked: impossible to approach his work without first of all passing, already, by the re-treat of its inside, namely, the remarkable saying of the work. Not only what can be found said on this subject, but the intr(el)aced saying which comes to it from out of the other and never returns it to itself, and which comes (for example, exemplarily) from you (come), obligated female reader (*lectrice obligée*). You can still refuse to grant him that sense, or only lend yourself to that *Sinngebung* while still not approaching that singular ellipsis where nevertheless you are already caught, perhaps.

—I knew. In listening I was nonetheless wondering whether I was comprehended, myself, and how to stop that word: comprehended. And how the work knew me, whatever it knew of me. So be it: to begin by reading his work, giving it to him, in order to approach the Work, which itself does not begin with “his” work nor with whoever would pretend to say “my” work. Going toward the Other, coming from the Same so as not to return to it, the work does not come from there, but from the Other. And his work makes a work in the re-treat which re-marks this heteronomous movement. The re-treat is not unique, although it remarks the unique, but its seriesure is unique. Not his signature—the “he” undersigning and under seal—but his seriesure. So be it. Now if, in reading what he shall have had to give, I take account of the unique seriesure, I should, for example, ascertain that the word “work” no more than any other has a fixed sense outside of the mobile syntax of marks, outside of the contextual transformation. The variation is not arbitrary, the transformation is regulated in its irregularity and in its very disturbance. But how? By what? By whom? I shall give or take an example of it. More or perhaps another thing than an example, that of the “son” in *Totality and Infinity*, of the “unique” son or sons: “The son is not merely my work like a poem or an object.” That is on page 254 of *Totalité et Infini* (TI 277), and I assume that the context is re-read. Although defined as beyond “my work,” “the son” *here* seems rather to have the traits of what in other contexts, doubtless later on, is called, with a capital letter, the Work. Otherwise said, the word *work* has neither the same *sense* nor the same *reference* in the two contexts, without however there being any incoherence or contradiction among them. *They even have a wholly other link to sense and reference.*

“The son”—movement without return toward the other beyond the work—thus resembles what is called elsewhere and later on, the Work. Elsewhere

and later on, I also read: "The link with the Other by means of the son" (*Du sacré au saint*). [52]

Now, in the same paragraph of *Totality and Infinity* (and elsewhere) where it is nearly always "son" (and "paternity") that is said, a sentence talks of the "child." ("I don't have my child, I am my child. Paternity is a relation with the stranger who while being Other [*autrui*] . . . is me; a relationship of the ego with a self which is nevertheless not me.") Is it that "son" is another word for "child," a child who could be of one or the other sex? If so, whence comes that equivalence, and what does it mean? And why couldn't the "daughter" play an analogous role? Why should the son be more or better than the daughter, than me, the Work beyond "my work"? If there were no differences from this point of view, why should "son" better represent, in advance, this indifference? This unmarked indifference?

Around this question which I here abandon to its elliptical course, I interrogate the link, in E. L.'s Work, between sexual difference—the Other as the other sex, otherwise said as otherwise sexed—and the Other as wholly other, beyond or before sexual difference. To himself, his text marks its signature by a masculine "I-he," a strange matter as was elsewhere noted "in passing," a while back, by an other. ("Let us observe in passing that *Totality and Infinity* pushes the respect for dissymmetry to the point where it seems to us impossible, essentially impossible, that it could have been written by a woman. The philosophical subject of it is man [*vir*].") And on the same page that says "the son" "lying beyond "my work," I can also read: "Neither knowledge nor power. In voluptuousity, the Other—the feminine—retires into its mystery. The relation with it (the Other) is a relation with its absence." His signature thus assumes the sexual mark, a remarkable phenomenon in the history of philosophical writing, if the latter has always been interested in occupying that position without re-marking upon it or assuming it on, without signing its mark. But, as well as this, E. L.'s work seems to me to have always rendered secondary, derivative, and subordinate, alterity as sexual difference, the trait of sexual difference, to the alterity of a sexually non-marked wholly other. It is not woman or the feminine that he has rendered secondary, derivative, or subordinate, but sexual difference. Once sexual difference is subordinated, it is always the case that the wholly other, who is *not yet marked* is *already* found to be marked by masculinity (he before he/she, son before son/daughter, father before father/mother, etc.). An operation whose logic has seemed to me as constant as it is illogical (last example to date, Freudian psychoanalysis and everything that returns to it), yet with an illogicality that will have made possible and thus marked all logic—from the moment it exists as such—with this prolegomenal "he." How can one mark as masculine the very thing said to be anterior, or even foreign, to sexual difference? My question will be clearer if I content myself with quoting. Quoting not all of those passages where he affirms femininity as an "ontological category," ("The feminine

figures among the categories of Being”), a gesture [53] which always leaves me wondering as to whether it understands (*comprend*) me to be *against* a tradition that would have refused me that ontological dignity, or whether better than ever it understands me to be *within* that very tradition, profoundly repeating it. But rather quoting these passages:

Within Judaism woman will only have the destiny of a human being, whose femininity will solely count as an attribute . . . the femininity of the woman would know neither how to deform or absorb its human essence. In Hebrew “woman” is called *Ichah*, because, the bible says, she comes from man, *Iche*. The doctors seize hold of this etymology in order to affirm the unique dignity of the Hebrew that expresses the very mystery of creation, woman derived quasi-grammatically from man. . . . “Flesh of my flesh and bone of my bones” signifies therefore an identity of nature between man and woman, an identity of destiny and dignity and also a subordination of sexual life to the personal link that is equality in itself. An idea more ancient than the principles on behalf of which modern woman fights for emancipation, yet the *truth* of all those principles in a sphere where the thesis which opposes itself to the image of an initial androgyny is supported as well, attached to the popular idea of the rib-side. That truth maintains a certain priority of the masculine; he remains the prototype of the human and determines eschatology. The differences of the masculine and the feminine are blotted out in those messianic times.

(“*Judaism and the Feminine*,” in DL)

Very recently:

The sense of the feminine will be found clarified by taking as a point of departure the human essence, the *Ischa* following the *Isch*: not the feminine following the masculine, but the partition—the dichotomy—between masculine and feminine following the human. . . . beyond the personal relationship which establishes itself between these two beings issued from two creative acts, the particularity of the feminine is a secondary matter. It isn’t woman who is secondary, it is the relation to woman *qua* woman that doesn’t belong to the primordial human plan. What is primary are the tasks accomplished by man as a human being, and by woman as a human being. . . . The problem, in each of these lines we are commenting upon at this moment, consists in reconciling the humanity of men and women with the hypothesis of a spirituality of the masculine, the feminine being not his correlative but his corollary; feminine specificity or the difference of the sexes that it announces are not straight away situated at the height of the oppositions constitutive of Spirit. Audacious question: How can the equality of the

sexes proceed from a masculine property? . . . There had to be a difference that would not compromise equity, a sexual difference; and consequently, a certain pre-eminence of man, a woman arrived later and *qua* woman as an appendix to the human. Now we understand the lesson: Humanity cannot be thought beginning from two entirely different principles. There must be some *sameness* common to these *others*: woman has been chosen above man, but has come after him: *the very femininity of woman consists in this initial afterwards (après coup)*.

("Et Dieu Créa la Femme," in *Du sacré au saint*, 132-42) [54]

Strange logic, that of the "audacious" question. It would be necessary to comment upon each step and verify that each time the secondary status of sexual difference signifies the secondary status of the feminine (But why is this so?) and that the initial status of the predifferential is each time marked by this masculinity that should, however, have come only afterwards, like every other sexual mark. It would be necessary to comment, but I prefer, under the heading of a protocol, to underline the following: he is commenting himself, and says that he is commenting; it must be taken into account that this discourse is not literally that of E. L. While holding discourse, he says that he is commenting upon the doctors *at this very moment* ("the lines we are commenting upon at this moment," and further on: "I am not taking sides; today, I comment"). But the distance of the commentary is not neutral. What he comments upon is consonant with a whole network of affirmations which are his, or those of him, "he." Furthermore, the position of commentator corresponds to a choice: to at least accompany and not displace, transform, or even reverse what is written in the text that is commented upon. I do not wish to dominate the discourse on this subject. Concerning an unpublished (*inédit*) writing, here is the discourse of an other:

If woman, therefore, quasi-grammatically derives from man, this indeed implies, as Levinas affirms, the same identity of destiny and dignity, an identity which it is suitable to think of as "the recurrence of self in responsibility-for-other," yet that also forms part of a double regime for the separated existence of man and woman. And if Levinas refuses to see in this separation a fall from some primary unity, if he repugns indifferenciation because separation is worth more than primary unity, he nevertheless establishes an order of precedence. If the derivation is thought with relation to a grammar, it is doubtless not due to chance. For grammar here testifies to the privilege of a name which always associates eschatological disinterestedness to the Work of paternity. That name can still be taken as what effectively determines eschatology within the derivation of a genealogy.

To write grammar otherwise or invent some surprising (*inédites*) faults is not to wish a reversal of that determination. It is not a defiance equating itself with pride. It is to become aware that language is not a simple modality of thinking. That the logos is not neutral, as Levinas had also recognized. That the difficulty confronting him in his election—which seems to him that it cannot be exceeded—of using the Greek side in order to make a thought which comes from elsewhere be understood is not perhaps foreign to a certain mutism of the feminine. As if the surprise (*l'inédit*) of another syntax loses its way in the necessity of borrowing the path of a unique logos.

(Catherine Chaliier, *Figures du féminin: Lecture d'Emmanuel Levinas*, unpublished [*inédit*])³

I come then to my question. Since it (*elle*) is under-signed by the Pronoun He (*Il*) (before he/she, certainly, but it is not She), could it be that in making sexual alterity secondary, far from allowing itself to be approached from the Work, his, or the one said to be, becomes [55] a mastery, the mastery of sexual difference posed as the origin of femininity? Hence mastery of femininity? The very thing that *must not have been* mastered, and that one—therefore—has been unable to avoid mastering, or at least attempting to master? The very thing that must not have been derived from an *arche* (neutral, and therefore, he says, masculine) in order to be subjected to it? The aneconomical, that must not have been *economized*, situated in the house, *within* or *as* the law of the *oikos*? The secondary status of the sexual, and therefore, He says, of feminine difference, does it not thus come to stand for the wholly-other of this Saying of the wholly other within the seriasure here determined and within the idiom of this negotiation? Does it not show, on the inside of the work, a surfeit of un-said alterity? Or said, precisely as a secret or as a symptomatic mutism? Then things would become more complicated. The other as feminine (me), far from being derived or secondary, would become the other of the Saying of the wholly other, of this one in any case; and this last one *insofar* as it would have tried to dominate alterity, would risk, (at least to this extent) enclosing *itself* within the economy of the same.

Wholly otherwise said: made secondary by responsibility for the wholly other, sexual difference (and hence, He says, femininity) is retained, as other, within the economic zone of the same. Included in the same, it is by the same stroke excluded: enclosed within, foreclosed within the immanence of a crypt, incorporated in the Saying which says itself to the wholly other. To desexualise the link to the wholly-other (or equally well, the unconscious as a certain philosophical interpretation of psychoanalysis tends to do today), to make sexuality secondary with respect to a wholly-other that in itself would not be sexually marked ("beneath erotic alterity, the alterity of the one for the other; responsibility before eros" [AE 113n; OB 192 n. 27]), is

always to make sexual difference secondary *as* femininity. Here I would situate his profound complicity with such an interpretation of psychoanalysis. This complicity, more profound than the abyss he wishes to put between his thinking and psychoanalysis, always gathers around one fundamental design: their common link to me, to the other as woman. That is what I would like to give them (first of all, to read).

Shall I abuse this hypothesis? The effect of secondarization, allegedly demanded by the wholly-other (as He), would become the cause, otherwise said the other of the wholly other, the other of a wholly other who is no longer sexually neutral but *posed* (*posé*) (outside the series within the seriesure) and suddenly determined as He. Then the Work, apparently signed by the Pro-noun He, would be dictated, aspired, and inspired by the desire to make She secondary, therefore *by* She (*Elle*). She would then under-sign the under-signed work from her place of derivable dependence or condition as last or first "Hostage." Not in the sense that undersigning would amount to confirming the signature, but countersigning the work, again not in the sense that countersigning would amount to redoubling the signature, according to the same or the contrary—but *otherwise than signing*.

The whole system of *this* seriesure would silently comment upon the [56] absolute heteronomy in respect to She who would be the wholly other. *This* heteronomy was writing the text from its other side like a weaver its fabric (*ouvrage*); yet it would be necessary here to undo a metaphor of weaving which has not imposed itself by chance: we know to what kind of interpretative investments it has given rise as regards to a feminine specificity which Freudian psychoanalysis *also regularly* derives.

I knew it. What I here suggest is not without violence, not even free of the redoubled violence of what he calls "traumatism," the nonsymbolizable wound that comes, before any other effraction, from the past anterior of the other. A terrifying wound, a wound of *life*, the only one that life opens up (*fraye*) today. Violence faulty in regard to his name, his work, insofar as it inscribes his proper name in a way that is no longer that of property. For, in the end, the derivation of femininity is not a simple movement in the seriesure of his text. The feminine is also described there as a figure of the wholly other. And then, we have recognized that this work is one of the first and rare ones, in this history of philosophy to which it does not simply belong, not to feign effacing the sexual mark of his signature: hence, he would be the last one surprised by the fact that the other (of the whole system of his saying of the other) happens to be a woman, and commands him from that place. Also, it is not a matter of reversing places and putting woman against him in the place of the wholly other as *arche*. If what I say remains false, falsifying, faulty, it is also to the extent that dissymmetry (I speak from my place as woman, and supposing that she be definable) can also reverse the perspectives, while leaving the schema intact.

It has been shown above that ingratitude and contamination did not occur as an accidental evil. It's a sort of fatality of the Saying. It is to be negotiated. It would be worse without negotiation. Let's accept it: what I am writing at this very moment is faulty. Faulty up to a certain point, in touching, or so as not to touch, his name, or what he sets to work in his rigorously proper name in this unsuccessful act (as he says) within a work. If his proper name, E. L., is in the place of the Pronoun (He) which preseals everything that can carry a name, it isn't him, but Him, that my fault comes to wound in his body. Where, then, will my fault have taken bodily form? Where in his body will it have left a mark, in his body to Him, I mean? What is the body of a fault in this writing where the traces of the wholly other are exchanged, without circulating or ever becoming present? If I wished to destroy or annul my fault, I would have to know what is happening to the text being written at this very moment, where it can take place or what can remain of its remains.

In order to make my question better understood, I shall take a detour around what he tells us of the name of God, in the nonneutral commentary which he proposes (ND). According to the treatise *Chevouoth* (35a), it is forbidden [57] to efface the names of God, even in the case when a copyist would have altered the form. The whole manuscript then has to be buried. Such a manuscript, E. L. says, "has to be placed into the earth like a dead body." But what does placing in earth mean? And what does a "dead body" mean, since it is not effaced or destroyed but "placed in the earth"? If one simply wanted to annihilate it—to no longer keep (*garder*) it—the whole thing would be burned, everything would be effaced without remains. The dys-graphy (*disgraphie*) would be replaced, without remnant, by orthography. In inhuming it, on the contrary, the fault on the proper name is not destroyed, at bottom one keeps guard of it, as a fault, one keeps it at the bottom. It will slowly decompose, taking its time, in the course of a work of mourning in which, achieved successfully in spiritual interiorization, an idealization that certain psychoanalysts call introjection, or paralyzed in a melancholic pathology (incorporation), the other as other will be kept in guard, wounded, wounding, impossible utterance. The topic of such a faulty text remains highly improbable, like the taking-place of its remains in this theonymic cemetery.

If I now ask at this very moment where I should return my fault, it is because of a certain *analogy*: what he recalls about the names of God is something one would be tempted to say analogically for every proper name. He would be the Pro-noun (*Pro-nom*) or the First name (*Pré-nom*) of every name. Just as there is a resemblance between the face of God and the face of man (even if this resemblance is neither an "ontological mark" of the worker on his work nor "sign" or "effect" of God), in the same way there would be an analogy between all proper names and the names of God, which are, in their turn, analogous among themselves. Consequently, I transport by

analogy to the proper name of man or woman what is said of the names of God. And of the "fault" on the body of these names.

But things are more complicated. If, in *Totality and Infinity*, the analogy is kept, though not quite in a classical sense, between the face of God and the face of man, here, on the contrary, in the commentary on the Talmudic texts, a whole movement is sketched in order to mark the necessity of interrupting that analogy, of "refusing to God any analogy with beings that are certainly unique, but who compose with other beings a world or a structure. To approach through a proper name is to affirm a relation irreducible to the knowledge which thematises or defines or synthesises, and which, by that very fact, understands the correlate of that knowledge as being, as finite, and as immanent." Yet the analogy once interrupted is again resumed as an analogy between absolute heterogeneities by means of the enigma, the ambiguity of uncertain and precarious epiphany. Monotheistic humanity has a *link* to this trace of a past which is absolutely anterior to any memory, to the absolute re-treat (*re-trait*) of the revealed name, to its very inaccessibility. "Square letters are a precarious dwelling whence the revealed Name already withdraws itself; effaceable letters at the mercy of the man who traces them or recopies them." Man, therefore, can be linked with this retreat, despite the infinite distance of the nonthematizable, with the [58] precariousness and uncertainty of this revelation.

But this uncertain epiphany, on the verge of evanescence, is precisely that which *man alone can retain*. This is why he is the essential moment both of this transcendence and of its manifestation. That is why, through this ineffaceable revelation, he is called forth with an unparalleled straightforwardness.

But is that revelation precarious enough? Is the Name free enough in regard to the context where it lodges? Is it preserved in writing from all contamination by being or culture? Is it preserved from man, who has indeed a vocation to retain it, but who is capable of every abuse?

Paradox: the precariousness of the revelation is never precarious enough. But should it be? And if it was, wouldn't that be worse?

Once the analogy is resumed, as one resumes the interruptions and not the threads, it should be recalled, I should be able to transpose the discourse on the names of God to the discourse on human names; for example, where there is no longer an example, that of E. L.

And thus to the fault to which the one and the other expose themselves in body. The fault will always, already, have taken place: as soon as I thematize what, in his work, is borne beyond the thematizable and is put in a regular series within which he cannot not sign himself. Certainly, there is already contamination in his work, in that which he thematizes "at this very moment" of the nonthematizable. I am contaminating this irrepressible thematization

in my turn; and not merely according to a common structural law, but just as much with a fault of my own that I will not seek to resolve or absolve within the general necessity. As a woman, for example, and in reversing the dissymmetry, I have added rape (*viol*) to it. I should have been even more unfaithful to him, more ungrateful, but was it not then in order to give myself up to what his work says of the Work: that it provokes ingratitude? Here to absolute ingratitude, the least foreseeable in his work itself?

I give and play ingratitude against jealousy. Everything I say concerns jealousy. The thought of the trace as put in *seriasure* by E. L., thinks a singular link of God (not contaminated by being) to jealousy. He, the one who has passed beyond all Being, must be exempt from all jealousy, from all desire for possession, guarding, property, exclusivity, nonsubstitution, etc. And the link to Him must be pure of all jealous economy. But this without-jealousy (*sans-jalousie*) cannot not jealously guard itself, and insofar as it is an absolutely reserved past, it is the very possibility of all jealousy. Ellipsis of jealousy: *seriasure* is always a jealousy through which, seeing without seeing everything, and especially without being seen, before and beyond the phenomenon, the without-jealousy jealously guards itself, otherwise said, loses itself, keeps-itself-loses-itself. By means of a series of regular traits and re-treats (*re-traits*): the figure of jealousy, beyond the face. Never more jealousy, ever, never more zeal, is it possible? [59]

If feminine difference presealed, perhaps and nearly illegibly, his work, if she became, in the depths of the same, the other of his other, will I then have deformed his name, to him, in writing, at this moment, in this work, here indeed, "she will have obligated" (*elle aura obligé*)?

— I no longer know if you are saying what his work says. Perhaps that comes back to the same. I no longer know if you are saying the contrary, or if you have already written something wholly other. I no longer hear your voice, I have difficulty distinguishing it from mine, from any other, your fault suddenly becomes illegible to me. Interrupt me.

— HERE AT THIS VERY MOMENT I ROLL UP THE BODY OF OUR INTERLACED VOICES CONSONANTS VOWELS ACCENTS FAULTY IN THIS MANUSCRIPT ~ I MUST PLACE IT IN THE EARTH FOR YOU ~ COME LEAN DOWN OUR GESTURES WILL HAVE HAD THE INCONSOLABLE SLOWNESS THE GIFT REQUIRES AS IF IT WERE NECESSARY TO DELAY THE ENDLESS FALLING DUE OF A REPETITION ~ IT'S OUR MUTE INFANT A GIRL PERHAPS STILLBORN OF AN INCEST WILL ONE EVER KNOW PROMISE TO THE INCEST ~ FAULTY OR LACKING IN HER BODY SHE WILL HAVE LET HERSELF BE DESTROYED ONE DAY WITHOUT REMAINDER ONE MUST HOPE ONE MUST GUARD ONESELF FROM HOPE EVEN THAT THUS ALWAYS

MORE AND NO MORE JEALOUSY THE BETTER SHE WILL BE KEPT GUARDED ~ MORE AND NO MORE THAN ENOUGH DIFFERENCE THERE AMONG THEM (*ELLES*) BETWEEN THE INHUMED OR THE ASHES OF A BURN-ALL (*BRÛLE-TOUT*) ~ NOW HERE EVEN THE THING OF THIS LITURGY KEEPS OR GUARDS ITSELF LIKE A TRACE OTHERWISE SAID LOSES ITSELF BEYOND PLAY AND EXPENSE ALL IN ALL AND ALL ACCOUNTING FOR OTHERS DONE ALREADY SHE LETS HERSELF BE EATEN ~ BY THE OTHER BY YOU WHO WILL HAVE GIVEN HER TO ME ~ YOU [60] ALWAYS KNEW HER TO BE THE PROPER BODY OF THE FAULT SHE WILL ONLY HAVE BEEN CALLED BY HER LEGIBLE NAME BY YOU AND THEREBY DISAPPEARED IN ADVANCE ~ BUT IN THE BOTTOMLESS CRYPT THE INDECIPHERABLE STILL GIVES READING FOR A LAPSE ABOVE HER BODY WHICH SLOWLY DECOMPOSES IN ANALYSIS ~ WE MUST HAVE A NEW BODY ANOTHER WITHOUT ANY MORE JEALOUSY THE MOST ANCIENT STILL TO COME ~ SHE DOESN'T SPEAK THE UNNAMEABLE YET YOU HEAR HER BETTER THAN ME AHEAD OF ME AT THIS VERY MOMENT WHERE NONETHELESS ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE MONUMENTAL WORK I WEAVE MY VOICE SO AS TO BE EFFACED THIS TAKE IT HERE I AM EAT ~ GET NEARER ~ IN ORDER TO GIVE HIM/HER ~ DRINK⁴

Editors' notes

- 1 The translator would like to thank Geoff Bennington for his generous advice on an earlier version of this translation and Simon Critchley for his work on later versions. The page numbers of the French original have been included in square brackets.
- 2 "I am sick of love," Song of Songs, v. 8, (AE 180–81; OB 141–42).
- 3 Since published in a modified version in the series *La nuit surveillée*, Paris, 1982. See p. 97.
- 4 The final lines of the essay, almost as strange in French as they are in English, contain a number of undecidable ambiguities which the English cannot capture. Most notably, the phrase "plus de jalousie," which also appears on the preceding page, can signify both "more jealousy" and "no more jealousy," while "plus assez de différence" can be rendered as both "more than enough difference" and "no more than enough difference." In addition, "en faute de" can be translated as both "faulty" and "lacking," while "se garder" means both "to keep oneself" and "to guard oneself." Hence the phrase translated as "one must guard oneself from hope" might also have been translated "one must keep some hope for oneself." The words "toute compte" suggest at once the translations "all in all," "everything counts," and "all accounting." Finally, an English translation cannot hope to evoke the resonances between "il faut," "il me faut," "il nous faut," "fautifs," "en faute de," and "la faute" that recur in these lines and throughout the essay. With Derrida's encouragement we are including the original French of the final lines of his essay.

~ VOICI EN CE MOMENT MÊME J'ENROULE LE CORPS DE NOS VOIX
 ENTRELACIÉES CONSONNES VOYELLES ACCENTS FAUTIFS DANS CE
 MANUSCRIT ~ IL ME FAUT POUR TOI LE METTRE EN TERRE ~ VIENS
 PENCHE-TOI NOS GESTES AURONT EU LA LENTEUR INCONSOL-
 ABLE QUI CONVIENT AU DON COMME S'IL FALLAIT RETARDER
 L'ÉCHÉANCE SANS FIN D'UNE RÉPÉTITION ~ C'EST NOTRE ENFANT
 MUET UNE FILLE PEUT-ÊTRE D'UN INCESTE MORT-NÉE A L'INCESTE
 SAURA-T-ON JAMAIS PROMISE ~ EN FAUTE DE SON CORPS ELLE
 SE SERA LAISSÉ DÉTRUIRE UN JOUR ET SANS RESTE IL FAUT
 L'ESPÉRER IL FAUT SE GARDER DE L'ESPOIR MÊME QU'AINSI
 TOUJOURS PLUS DE JALOUSIE ELLE SE GARDERA MIEUX ~ PLUS
 ASSEZ DE DIFFÉRENCE LA ENTRE ELLES ENTRE L'INHUMÉE OU
 LES CENDRES D'UN BRULE-TOUT ~ MAINTENANT ICI MÊME LA
 CHOSE DE CETTE LITURGIE SE GARDE COMME UNE TRACE
 AUTREMENT DIT SE PERD AU-DELA DU JEU ET DE LA DÉPENSE
 TOUT COMPTE POUR D'AUTRES FAIT ELLE SE LAISSE DÉJÀ
 MANGER ~ PAR L'AUTRE PAR TOI QUI ME L'AURAS DONNÉE ~ TU
 SAVAIS DEPUIS TOUJOURS QU'ELLE EST LE CORPS PROPRE DE
 LA FAUTE ELLE N'AURA ÉTÉ APPELÉE DE SON NOM LISIBLE QUE
 PAR TOI EN CELA D'AVANCE DISPARUE ~ MAIS DANS LA CRYPTÉ
 SANS FOND L'INDÉCHIFFRABLE DONNE ENCORE A LIRE POUR UN
 LAPS AU-DESSUS DE SON CORPS QUI LENTEMENT SE DÉCOMPOSE A
 L'ANALYSE ~ IL NOUS FAUT UN NOUVEAU CORPS UN AUTRE SANS
 PLUS DE JALOUSIE LE PLUS ANCIEN ENCORE A VENIR ~ ELLE NE
 PARLE PAS L'INNOMMÉE OR TU L'ENTENDS MIEUX QUE MOI AVANT
 MOI EN CE MOMENT MÊME OU POURTANT SUR L'AUTRE COTÉ
 DE CET OUVRAGE MONUMENTAL JE TISSE DE MA VOIX POUR M'Y
 EFFACER CECI TIENS ME VOICI MANGE ~ APPROCHE-TOI ~ POUR
 LUI DONNER ~ BOIS

ETHICS AND ONTOLOGY

Some hypocritical reflections

*Jean Greisch*Source: *Irish Philosophical Journal* 4 (1987): 64–75.

If we take seriously the question, 'Is ontology fundamental?' and the corresponding claim that ethics has the rank of a first philosophy with respect to any ontological inquiry, however fundamental, it becomes a matter of some urgency to clarify the status of the reflections on which we are thereby launched, under pain of allowing the debate associated nowadays with the names of Heidegger and Levinas to degenerate into a sterile doxographical opposition. These questions belong essentially to the realm of first philosophy. Just as the contrasting philosophical positions of Plato and Aristotle are of less moment than their latent fundamental cleavage with respect to the nature of philosophy itself, so the opposition of Levinas to Heidegger concerns primarily the very notion of ontology. This issue of first philosophy lies deeper than the habitual image of two entrenched camps opposed under the flaming banners of Ethics and Ontology; it brings together the two thinkers in a common question, expressed by Heidegger as 'what is called thinking?', by Levinas as the question of the intelligibility of the intelligible, the significance of sense and of reason. Thus, rather than characterize these thinkers as 'post-metaphysical', a largely inaccurate characterization in both cases, we may see them as renewing the question of first philosophy in a contemporary key.

It is tempting to treat the debate between the two thinkers in a 'meta-critical' style, producing a masterful overview of rival positions; but I prefer to approach it 'hypo-critically' in a sense suggested by the Preface to *Totality and Infinity*, where hypocrisy is described as 'the radical tornness of a world attached at the same time to the philosophers and to the prophets'. Contemporary philosophy, torn between Heidegger and Levinas, exhibits analogous hypocritical tensions which the following hypocritique attempts to espouse and measure.

I The basic upshot of the debate

Such an hypocritical reading renounces the dogmatic opposition which so often blocks access to what is basically at stake in the debate. For instance, a hasty reading of the *Letter on Humanism* might suggest that the ethical question is totally eclipsed by the question of the truth of Being. This is to overlook Heidegger's explicit and repeated acknowledgement of the young Beaufret's question concerning the 'relation of ontology to a possible ethics', a question which recalls to him one posed by an unnamed 'young friend' shortly after the publication of *Sein und Zeit*. Heidegger interprets the desire underlying this question as 'a demand for binding guidance . . . , for rules telling how man, experienced as ek-sisting towards Being ought to live in accordance with his destiny'. This merely corresponds to the basic preoccupation of most philosophical ethics: to found a system of norms making human life livable. We are here in the realm of morality, but not in that of fundamental ethics.

True, Heidegger goes on to reduce this approach to a provisional status, moving the debate to the level of a more ordinary ethics, inspired by the Greek term *ethos* and Heraclitus's fragment 119, and focused on the question of the site, the dwelling, and the hearth. This presupposes what one might call a **hestiological** determination of ontology. Whenever Heidegger deals with ethics, the goddess Hestia is indeed near at hand. Such an approach to the truth of Being relativizes ethics, but it also makes ontology problematic! Levinas's question 'is ontology fundamental?' has as its target the 'understanding of being' (*Seinsverständnis*) and the 'fundamental ontology' of the period of *Sein und Zeit*. Does it effectively engage this later, more radical conception of the truth of Being? Furthermore, does it do justice to the intrinsically 'ethical' dimension of the question of human dwelling in the truth of Being?

It all depends, of course, on the validity of Heidegger's displacement of the ethical issue. Does it allow him to understand the ethical concern of Beaufret better than he himself did, or does it blunt the edge of Beaufret's question? Does Heidegger succeed in defining very precisely the threshold which both ethical and ontological thinking must cross in order to attain the space of questioning which alone merits the name of first philosophy? The *Letter's* account of the style of thinking it advocates hardly goes beyond a handful of counsels: it is a thinking which is neither practical nor theoretical, lying beyond this sort of distinction; it possesses a rigour *sui generis* quite distinct from the criteria of validity which scientific discourse must satisfy. Here at least Levinas and Heidegger are in full accord. The preface of *Totality and Infinity* calls for the abolition of the traditional cleavage of theory and practice, in order that both can be apprehended as the two inseparable 'modes' of ethical transcendence. This agreement is the indispensable backcloth to the question whether ontology is fundamental.

That question, in fact, presupposes a substantial concession to Heidegger. Levinas is at one with him in what is new in contemporary ontology, and what separates it for ever from previous metaphysics: the discovery of Husserl, completed by Heidegger, that 'every human being is ontology', inasmuch as there is understanding of being everywhere and not merely in the theoretical attitudes. Because of this universality, one can sustain the claim that 'ontology is the essence of every relation with beings and even of every relation with Being'. Thus, 'to understand becomes synonymous with to exist'. It is to this new ontological discourse and to it alone that Levinas addresses his critical question: 'what are we to make of the universal scope of this fact of understanding?' The question may seem an impossible one, for there is no higher universality to which it can appeal. The one 'meta-critical' question which preoccupies Levinas is that of the essential significance of the 'horizontal' universality proper to all understanding. Thus, Levinas reduces the understanding inaugurated by Heidegger to the traditional articulation of particular and universal: 'to understand is to relate oneself to the particular, which alone exists, through knowledge which is always knowledge of the universal'. But this critique also serves as the vehicle of a subtler, more insinuating interrogation of Heidegger's understanding of being.

Levinas's ethical critique concerns precisely the subjection of the particular to the always already universal discourse of understanding. Since one's relation to a 'being among others', and thus particular, 'outsteps the discourse of understanding', we must say that 'in our relation to the other person, the latter does not affect us in terms of a concept'. Here is the decisive flaw in the apparently completely smooth discourse of understanding. Every effort of understanding is outstepped by a speech-event impossible to master: 'understanding the other person is inseparable from invoking him'. The thought of Levinas as a whole may be read as an effort to sound the abyss of this flaw. The fact of invocation is in turn referred to the epiphany of the face and to the discovery of the other person as the one who has always already taken me 'hostage'. The ruse of phenomenological reason consisted in a constant enlargement of the circle of understanding beyond the realm of purely cognitive acts. It reaches its true limit in the fact that 'the other person summons me [*l'autrui me regarde*]'.

II Heidegger's Levinasian moment

In the lectures on *Metaphysical Principles of Logic Beginning from Leibniz* (summer term 1928), one year after the publication of *Sein und Zeit*, that is, precisely at the time of the encounter with the 'young friend' whose identity remains obscure, Heidegger addressed the ethical issue for the first time. In paragraph 10 (a passage which strikingly anticipates aspects of the *Letter on Humanism*), Heidegger undertakes a long self-interpretation, offering a key to a systematic reading of *Sein und Zeit*. He justifies the absence of ethical

questioning in his existential analytic and attempts to assign to it a place within a metaphysical project which he sketches programmatically, a project to which he gives the strange name: **metontology**. The self-interpretation turns on the question of the connection between transcendence and intelligibility and is formulated in twelve leading theses, bearing chiefly on the neutrality of the existential analytic and the fundamental ontology associated with it. It might seem that this neutrality implies the abandonment of the ethical question, a rejection the *Letter on Humanism* would then be seen as confirming. But in fact Heidegger says of the existential analytic and its fundamental ontology that 'the metaphysics of *Dasein* is not yet central'. In other words, *Sein und Zeit* does not present any metaphysical position, but remains neutral in regard to metaphysical commitment; as a consequence, 'the analytic of *Dasein* precedes all prophecies or proclamation of a world-view; nor is it a wisdom, for this can only be set forth within the structure of metaphysics'. This exclusion of ethics thus reflects the internal limits of fundamental ontology and is not intended to depreciate or disqualify the ethical enterprise.

The term **metontology** is one of the earliest indications that the very project of a fundamental ontology is beginning to be reformulated. The link between being and time established in *Sein und Zeit* is seen to demand a radicalization and universalization of the problem of being. A radicalization, because it is not a matter of rehabilitating objectivity with regard to Kantian 'subjectivism' in the manner of Nicolai Hartmann's 'critical realism', but rather one of forming a decision about the ontological dimension of subjectivity itself.

Also a universalization, which entails an increase in complexity and involves discernment of 'the unity of the idea of Being and its regional modifications', in the context of a more comprehensive questioning on four fundamental issues (already explored in the course *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*): '1. the ontological difference; 2. the fundamental articulation of Being; 3. the veritative character of Being; and 4. the regionality of Being and the unity of the problem of Being'.

To fundamental ontology is ascribed a triple task: to make clear the possibility of the question of Being which is also the *conditio sine qua non* of metaphysics; to propose a temporal interpretation of Being; and finally, 'to develop the self-understanding of this problematic, its task, and its limit—the reversal [*der Umschlag*]'. This third moment is the *meta* of the term 'metontology', which has the same sense as in *metanoia*, connoting a reversal or a turn (*Kehre*) of the problematic rather than a transgression as in the negative ontologies of a neoplatonic lineage. This new research is introduced by the realization that 'fundamental ontology does not exhaust the concept of metaphysics'! Still more strikingly, the avowal of the inherent limits of fundamental ontology expressly restores to the foreground the ethical problem in so far as it is bound up with metaphysics:

Hence the necessity of an original problematic, which takes the totality of beings as its theme. This new way of posing the question is contained in the essence of ontology itself and results from its reversal, is *metabole*. This problematic I call metontology. And it is in discerning the bounds of metontological-existential questioning that one defines also the scope of the metaphysics of existence (here alone can the ethical question be posed).

This turn, this 'metaphysical transformation [*metaphysische Verwandlung*]' of the ontological problem, is a quite unexpected development. Fundamental ontology seemed all-embracing; now it appears that 'it is in their unity that fundamental ontology and metontology compose the concept of metaphysics'! What are the themes of metontology? First, the reversal allows us to rediscover existants in their irreducible plurality, whereas the ontological difference seemed to bring about exactly the opposite movement. This reversal is not to be taken for granted; it runs the specific risk of a totalizing ontic thinking. Second, this ontology as ontic metaphysics seems to be identified to a certain extent with the ethical question itself.

The passage just discussed seems to me to mark the moment of greatest proximity between the questioning of Heidegger and that of Levinas. Later, with the discovery of the *Ereignis*, Heidegger abandons his project of constituting a metaphysics and we hear no more of metontology. The term *Kehre* (turn) takes on the signification defined in the *Letter on Humanism* and in other texts. Yet it may be that the problematic thus sacrificed has left traces in the *Letter* itself, especially in the way it approaches the ethical issue.

III 'The ethical strangeness'

If we are to understand the thesis of the primacy of ethics as a programme of first philosophy, rather than as a dogma placed in trivializing contrast to the rival thesis of the primacy of ontology, we need to replace it in the concrete texture of the phenomenological *travail*, seeking to clarify the path of thought whereby such a thesis is articulated and given substance. One central feature of this labour of thought is the recurring preoccupation with 'the other person under the species of the stranger [*l'étranger*: the alien, the foreigner]'. The theme occurs often in Levinas's more talmudic writing, in the context of biblical quotations or allusions, but no less in his directly philosophical texts, where it acquires a quasi-conceptual status and is often invoked to confer an irreducible ethical significance on the notion of otherness. This theme serves to reveal both the divergence and the proximity of ethical and ontological discourse in the space of first philosophy. What is the connection between the apparently regional topic of the stranger and the general metaphysical project of articulating transcendence and intelligibility, thus subverting the economy of a gathering Logos? The quest for an

eschatological rupture of totality depends on the possibility of apprehending the emergence of a 'contextless meaning'. 'Contextless meaning' is the phenomenological definition of the epiphany of the face, the fact that 'the other concerns me [*autrui me regarde*]'. But it is also the definition of the stranger.

What is novel here is not the theme of otherness, a staple of personalist philosophies, but the decisive discovery that close or distant, stranger or travelling companion, 'the other concerns me', with the effect that I must consider myself the 'hostage' of the other, who becomes a presence 'more intimate to me than myself' (to pillage Augustine). Subjectivity is here redefined as hospitality towards the other.

The theme of the stranger also inflects the metaphysical structure of desire in a sense opposed to Novalis's definition quoted in Heidegger's *Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik* (1929–1930): 'Philosophy is really a homesickness, a drive to be at home everywhere [*zu Haus zu sein*]'. For Levinas, metaphysical desire does not aim at return, for it is 'the desire for a country in which we were not born'. The romantic infinite as return from distance to a closeness to origin is here corrected by an ethical determination of the excess characteristic of desire, which is given the positive names of generosity and goodness.

The theme of otherness and the redefined dialectic of desire serve to reveal and overcome a stubborn egoism in all systems and representations. Only in 'analysing the way in which the things we enjoy come to us' can Husserlian phenomenology surpass the limits that imperil its scope. The revelation of a non-formal otherness, anterior to every initiative, allows one to dismiss two other notions of otherness as merely formal: on the one hand, the otherness of ego and world, whether envisaged in terms of Hegelian phenomenology of spirit or of a Heideggerian analytic of being-in-the-world; on the other hand, the relation of I and **Thou**, formalized by Buber in a way that still runs the danger of reduction to a 'reciprocity of consciousness'. It is the ethical demand which maintains the other persons in an alienness which resists all conceptual or categorical reduction, and in this analysis the notion of the stranger appears almost as the *definiens* of the concept of the other person.

Neither possession, nor the unity of a number, nor the unity of a concept connect me with the other person. This absence of a common fatherland makes the other—the stranger; the stranger who disturbs one's being at home. But the stranger is also the free one; in his regard I can exercise no control. . . . In turn, I, who share no common concept with the stranger, am like him without genus. We are the same and the other.

This analysis renders impracticable the traditional vocabulary of relation. If the fundamental ethical situation is a passivity more passive than any passivity, the emergence of a contextless meaning, or the movement of

'one-for-the-other [*l'un-pour-l'autre*]', it eludes both the Hegelian logic of relation and the existential or personalist language of relation. It calls for a new vocabulary capable of articulating the irreducibly dissymmetrical and intransitive nature of the 'intrigue' which binds the I to the other person. It is here that the opposition to ontological thinking, accused of missing the primordial importance of this intrigue, attains its most telling form. This opposition no longer falls into the familiar modes of reversing, or 'putting back on its feet', a system of thought, but takes rather the form of **insinuation**.

Always already the ethical question has insinuated itself into the ontological discourse, unsettling the configuration of the gathering Logos in the name of a different determination of the relation between transcendence and intelligibility. This insinuation is not merely a rhetorical troping, for it defines the unity of a style of thought. Against ontological thought, Levinas claims—insinuates—the necessity of another posture, that of a 'thought which thinks more radically than the thinking of being, a disintoxication which philosophy itself fits into the effort of expressing, that is, of communicating, even if only by means of a language that constantly unsays itself, that insinuates'. Perhaps this ethical insinuation is strongest when it finds itself confronting an ontological discourse fully confident of its purpose, just as the henologies and meontologies of antiquity needed ontological affirmations as their launching points.

IV Has ontology room for the stranger?

1. Does ontological discourse necessarily dissolve the ethical intrigue of otherness? The accusation of at least a partial failure to grasp the problem of the other person dates back to the earliest reception of *Sein und Zeit*. If we eliminate the misunderstandings due to the expectation that the existential analytic should fill the role of a fully developed anthropology, and grasp the analytic in its true purpose, the development of a fundamental ontology, we shall make the rather unexpected discovery that the question of the stranger is directly linked to the formulation of the problem of the meaning of Being: 'Ontically *Dasein* is the nearest proximity to itself, ontologically at the greatest distance from itself, yet preontologically not alien to itself'. Here it appears that a certain dialectic of closeness and distance is indeed constitutive of the ontological programme yielded by the existential analytic. From a Levinasian point of view, this formulation itself would doubtless betray a failure to apprehend the stranger ethically. But is this accusation justified? Why should it be forbidden to refer the encounter with the other person under the species of the stranger to a vaster and different dialectic? The sense of 'disturbing strangeness' (*das Unheimliche*, Freud) surrounds even the least demanding encounter with the stranger as part of its horizon; attention to this horizon in no way blocks access to the ultimate ethical stakes of the encounter.

Furthermore, the existential analytic in no way implies that *Dasein* is a subjectivity confined within solipsist certitudes and refusing to be disturbed by the other person. To characterize the strangeness of the question of Being as it imposes itself for *Dasein*, Heidegger quotes Saint Augustine, as does Levinas: 'What is nearer to me than myself? . . . I have become to myself a difficult terrain'. Exposed to the disturbing strangeness of Being, *Dasein* undergoes many more or less traumatizing experiences, among which the shock of the encounter with the other person certainly occupies a central place.

Within the existential analytic, it is the affect of anxiety which places *Dasein* before the totality of its Being and which confirms its estrangement from any assimilation to a mere being-at-hand. Thus is established the 'place' where it becomes possible to experience the disturbing strangeness of Being itself. Paradoxically, anxiety heightens the singularity of *Dasein*, making it more conscious than ever of its 'always-mineness [*Jemeinigkeit*]' and at the same time of its ultimate exposure to the world. Heidegger is aware of the peril of solipsism at this point, and wards it off by affirming that

this existential solipsism . . . far from transporting an isolated thing-subject into the indifferent void of a worldless occurrence, on the contrary places *Dasein* to an extreme degree before its world as world, and by the same stroke, brings itself before itself as being-in-the world.

The analysis of this disposition (*Befindlichkeit*) gives place to the terminology of 'unhomeliness' [*Unheimischkeit*] also invoked by Freud, where anxiety articulates a mode of being for which there is no longer any shelter or being-at-home (*Nicht-zu-Hause-sein*). The discovery that to be always means to occupy a place, to find oneself installed somewhere, can be attained only by passing through this experience of radical unsettlement, inherent in the texture of human life. Only one versed in this unhomeliness can inquire into the ontological sense of dwelling later exposed by Heidegger.

One may formulate the hypothesis that what has just been described is nothing other than the ontological condition of possibility for an ethical recognition of the other person as stranger. One needs to see that existence itself is not reassuring, if one is to recognize the traumatizing features of the encounter with the other. 'Calm and trustful being-in-the-world is a mode of the unhomeliness of *Dasein*, not vice versa. The not-at-home must be grasped as existentially-ontologically the more originary phenomenon'. If there is an issue of priority here, it concerns not the anteriority of 'the same' to the other, but only that of strange-ness (unhomeliness) to the reassuring sense of being at home. It is not precluded that ethical experience may oblige one to introduce another polarity, in which something different is at stake.

2. I turn now to a central thesis of the later Heidegger: 'Being is the hearth [*Der Herd ist das Sein*]'. This hestiological determination of post-metaphysical

ontology has to be referred to the set of the determinations established within a thinking entirely dominated by the two inseparable notions of *Ereignis* and Difference (*Austrag*). The statement in question occurs in the lecture course on Hölderlin's poem *Der Ister* ('The Danube'), a course which is thoroughly immersed in the 'dialectic' of the proper and the alien. This course was held in 1942, the year of Stalingrad, and between the lines one can glimpse the lecturer's preoccupation with the politics of occupying foreign countries (*Siedlungspolitik*) and even the politics of massive deportation of foreign populations (*Umsiedlungspolitik*). Of course the politics of extermination goes unmentioned. To this politics, the philosopher Heidegger rightly or wrongly opposes, not an ethical discourse on respect due to the foreigner, but his conviction that this politics is the carrying out of a specific metaphysical attitude, the will to power! Dictators, even the bloodiest, appear as accidents of history, the real moving force being 'the metaphysical essence of modern reality as such'. This peremptory plunge into the abyss of a decision adopting a metaphysical attitude in regard to being as a whole is highly questionable, but Heidegger does not stay to question it. Instead he asks whether some other 'principle' is capable of resisting the will to power. His reply to this is surprising, perhaps scandalous: that 'principle' is the originary temporality discovered and explored by Hölderlin in his River-hymns! A statement in characteristically chiasmic form (reflecting the structure of ontological difference) introduces the hestiological determination of ontology: 'The river is the site of errance: but the river is equally the errance of the site'. To inhabit, to dwell, the sacredness of 'lands of refuge': Heidegger mobilizes the set of these notions to determine the being of the 'sites' in question. Thence he deploys a dialectic of same and other, proper and alien, which he takes as defining the 'historiality of historical man'.

Does not all this confirm Levinas's suspicion that the ontological difference, which he describes as 'amphibology of Being and beings', entirely occludes the figure of 'the other person under the species of the stranger'? Being as hearth does not however exclude the stranger. In fact only the historical encounter with the foreigner—for instance that of Hölderlin with Pindar—allows man to find his way home.

The process of becoming familiar (*Heimischwerden*) is a traversal of the alien (*das Fremde*). If becoming familiar is for humanity what carries the historiality of its history, then the proper is the fundamental truth of history and it is from this truth that the essence of history unfolds.

Human being is not then an ipseity anchored in its certitudes and intent on a narrow *conatus essendi*. Quite the contrary! The secret of Being, which makes it a hearth, is revealed only to one that entirely accepts the extremely unsettling nature of his own destiny, as is illustrated by the case of Antigone, threatened with exclusion from the *polis*, expulsion from the hearth.

Manifold is the unsettling, nothing however
Exceeds human being in unsettlingness.

Unlike Hölderlin, Heidegger does not translate Sophocles's *ta dejna* as 'the monstrous [*das Ungeheure*]', but as the non-familiar (*das Unheimliche*). Only this 'violent' translation permits an emphasis on the relation between the sense of disturbing strangeness (*unheimlich*) and the absence of a dwelling (*unheimisch*), linking the anthropological statement more closely with the ontological one.

Threatened with expulsion from the hearth, and with reduction to the status of a foreigner, Antigone 'knows'—but with what 'knowledge'?—that she must assume this destiny—to suffer the unhomely. This is the highest way of undergoing the unsettling quality of existence. If Antigone is capable of this, it is because she possesses the knowledge of the hearth and the dwelling: 'All knowledge of strangeness is carried, led and enlightened by the knowledge of the hearth'.

I note in passing that these thoughts also imply a new conception of the divine. The 'knowing' of which Antigone is the representative keeps open a space in which the divine may be welcomed, a space of quite a different order from that of onto-theo-logy, one in which the relation of humans to the divine is thought according to the model of hospitality shown to the stranger. This hospitality and this visitation, however, would lose their meaning if the other name of the disturbing strangeness of Being were not the Sacred.

V The Meridian

It might seem that the preceding reflections have only deepened the divergence between ethics and ontology. Still, the quest for a place of intersection is not doomed to complete failure, for under certain conditions art may play the role of meridian permitting the two so different problematics to meet. Paul Celan's speech at Bremen, entitled precisely *The Meridian*, offers itself to our attention here, if only because of Levinas's commentary on it. The most important statement in that commentary seems to me to be the following: 'Nothing is stranger or more foreign than the other person, and it is in the illumination of Utopia that one contacts the human being beyond all rootedness and all domicile'.

Though this formulation does correspond to the final destination of the poem as Celan defines it, it runs the risk of occluding another no less essential dimension of Celan's speech. In discussing the wanderings of Lenz, in Georg Büchner's narrative, Celan first follows this errance in connection with Büchner's conception of art. As he does so, it emerges that the theme of art is not in the first place the epiphany of the face, but something more disturbing, the automaton and the puppet. The acceptance of this

supplement of artifice and strangeness allows art to fill its true role: to make the self a stranger to itself, to evoke a distance which at the same time opens a path that carries the self far from itself, dispossessing it in exposing it to the world and the other person. In this domain, there can be a true encounter with the other when the traversal of this disturbing strangeness is equally accepted. Poetry demands a self affected by the foreign (*ein befremdetes Ich*), at the risk of seeming hermetic. 'Do not complain of our obscurity', says Celan, quoting Pascal, 'for it is our business to be obscure'. And he adds: 'Yes, such obscurity is the lot of poetry in quest of an encounter, whether this be a congenital feature of poetry or whether it comes to it from some strange or backward region—perhaps from poetry itself as it projects itself'.

The strangeness of the poem thus includes two aspects, not to be disjoined. On one side, the apparent hermetism of a word on the brink of mutism, of *Atemwende*; on the other, poetry as an act of Utopic hope:

But I think . . . that at all times it is important to the hope of the poem to speak thus well, and also in this mode, of such an alien cause . . . this word, no, I have henceforth no use for it—of such a cause rather, which would concern an other—who knows, the wholly other, perhaps. That 'who knows' at which I see I have arrived is indeed the only thing which it is possible for me at this day, and place, to add to that ancient hoping.

Meditating on this possible encounter with the other and the wholly Other, Celan rejoins the Levinasian perspective. For it is true that this conception of the poetic word is not easily harmonized with the Heideggerian correlation of speech with the very voice of Being, overriding the singular angle of inclination of every existence enunciated in each poem. But with this important reservation, Celan's *Meridian*-speech does coincide with the basic theme of Hölderlin's *Der Ister*.

Does one really go by such paths when one thinks of poems, dealing with poems? Isn't that striking forth a forwarding and a detour from Thou to Thou? Yet these paths are at the same time, among so many others, also paths where the word finds voice; they are encounters, paths of a voice to a vigilant Thou, a section of an existence perhaps to come, a project of self on self, as long as the quest continues. . . . A kind of return to the birthplace.

Poetry as *eine Art Heimkehr*! The phrase echoes Heidegger's: 'all history is return to the hearth'; just as Celan's definition of the ontological vocation of poetry, 'Reality does not exist; reality wishes to be sought and won', corresponds to Heidegger's formula: 'Poetry is the "discovery" of Being

by means of the word [*Dichtung ist sagendes Finden des Seins*]. In this sense, but only in this sense, Celan's *Meridian* invites us to surpass the dichotomy between an ontological vocation of human speech and an 'ethical' one, between the disturbing strangeness of Being, which still has the power to surprise us, and the 'obsession' of the other under the species of the stranger who already holds us hostage.

THE FECUNDITY OF THE CARESS

A reading of Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*,
section IV, B, "The Phenomenology of Eros"

Luce Irigaray

Source: L. Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, tr. Carolyn Burke and Gillian Gill, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993, pp. 231–57. Originally published in French as *Ethique de la différence sexuelle*, Editions de Minuit, 1984.

On the horizon of a story is found, once again, that which was in the beginning: this naive, or native, sense of a touch, in which the subject does not yet exist. Submerged in *pathos* or *aisthesis*: astonishment, admiration, sometimes terror, before that which surrounds it.

Eros prior to any *eros* defined or measured as such. The voluptuousness of being born into a world where the gaze itself remains tactile – open to the light. Still carnal. Voluptuous without knowing it. Always at the beginning and not based upon the origin of a subject that sees, grows old, and dies, from no longer being in the enthusiasm and innocence of a perpetual beginning anew. A subject already "fixed." Not "free as the wind." A subject that already knows its objects and controls its relations with the world and with others. Already closed to any initiation. Already involved in initiatives that exclude the unknown. Already solipsistic. In charge of a world that it enjoys only through possession. With neither communion nor a childlike acceptance of that which gives of itself. A consumer who consumes what he produces without admiration for what offers itself to him in its unfinished state, before it becomes a finished product.

Voluptuousness can reopen and reverse this conception and construction of the world. It can return to the evanescence of subject and object. To the lifting of all schemas by which the other is defined. Made graspable by this definition. *Eros* can arrive at the innocence that never took place with the other as other. At that nonregressive in-finity of pathetic feeling for the other. At that appetite of all the senses, which is irreducible to any

obligatory consumption. At that indefinable attraction to the other, which will never be satiated. Which will always remain on the threshold, even after entering into the house. Which will remain a dwelling, preceding and following the habitation of all dwellings.

This always still-preliminary gesture, which precedes any union and comes first in all nuptials, which weds without consuming, which perfects while abiding by the outlines of the other, this gesture may be called: the touch of the caress.

Prior to and following any positioning of the subject, this touch binds and unbinds two others in flesh that is still, and always, untouched by mastery. Dressing the one and the other without-within, within-without, in a garment that neither evokes, invokes, nor takes pleasure in the perversity of the naked but contemplates and adorns it, always for a first time, with in-finite, un-finished flesh. Covering it, uncovering it, again and again, like an amorous impregnation that seeks out and affirms otherness, while protecting it.

In that place, nothing attests to the subject. The ever prolonged quest for a birth that will never take place, whose due date still, and always, recedes on the horizon. Life always open to what happens. To the fleeting touch of what has not yet found a setting. To the grace of a future that none can control. That will or will not happen. But while one waits for it, any possession of the world or of the other is suspended. A future coming, which is not measured by the transcendence of death but by the call to birth of the self and the other. For which each one arranges and rearranges the environment, the body, and the cradle, without closing the least dimension of a room, a house, an identity.

The fecundity of a love whose most elementary gesture, or deed, remains the caress.

Before orality comes to be, touch is already in existence. No nourishment can compensate for the grace, or the work, of touching. Touch makes it possible to wait, to gather strength, so that the other will return to caress and reshape, from within and from without, flesh that is given back to itself in the gestures of love. The most subtly necessary guardian of my life being the other's flesh. Approaching and speaking to me with his hands. Bringing me back to life more intimately than any regenerative nourishment, the other's hands, these palms with which he approaches without going through me, give me back the borders of my body and call me back to the remembrance of the most profound intimacy. As he caresses me, he bids me neither to disappear nor to forget but rather, to remember the place where, for me, the most intimate life holds itself in reserve. Searching for what has not yet come into being, for himself, he invites me to become what I have not yet become. To realize a birth still in the future. Plunging me back into the maternal womb and, beyond that, conception, awakening me to another – amorous – birth.

A birth that has never taken place, unless one remains at the stage of substitution for the father and the mother, which signifies a gesture that is radically unethical. Without respect for the one who gave me my body and without enthusiasm for the one who gives it back to me in his amorous awakening.

When the lovers substitute for, occupy, or possess the site that conceived them, they founder in the unethical, in profanation. They neither construct nor inhabit their love. Remaining in the no longer or the not yet. Sacrilegious sleepers, murderous dreamers – of the one and of the other in an unconscious state that would be the site of voluptuousness? Sterile, if it were not for the child.

Thus the closure, the sealing up of the society of couples. Barren – if it were not for the child? And the abandonment of the loved one¹ to the anonymity of love. To that touching vulnerability of one who can only be mortal. At least for him and in this place.

The caress does not try to dominate a hostile freedom. However profaning. Transgressing the freedom of God? Voluptuousness nourished by this transgression. Whence its always increasing avidity. Always deferring its possible? The lover sent back to the transcendental, the loved one plunged into the abyss. The caress would not attain that most intimate dwelling place where something gathers itself in from a more secret consummation? In and through a mucous shelter that extends from the depths to the heights? From the most subterranean to the most celestial? A movement from the one to the other that would take place in lovemaking?

Profanation always designates a threshold: the one where the simultaneity of what is hidden and what is revealed is in operation. The movement from mucous to skin? But also, the presentiment of the first dwelling place where, now, there is no one, only the memory and expectation of amorous fecundity. No nudity brings back to light the intimacy of that first house of flesh. Always nocturnal for a certain gaze – which wishes for clothing in order not to see what it cannot see entirely?

The evanescence of the caress opens upon a future different from an approach to the other's skin in the here and now. Stopping at that point would risk relegating the loved one to the realm of animality, once the moment of seduction had passed. Of penetration beyond anything visible. Always alien to the intimacy of the mucous membranes, not crossing the threshold, still staying outside, the lover continues to caress until he founders in some abyss. He does not attain communion with the most inward locus of the feeling and the felt, where body and flesh speak to each other.

In this moment of ultimate sympathy, the feeling and the felt go so far as to get out of their depth, until they are immersed in that which does not yet have an individualized form, until they are returned to the deepest level

of elemental flux, where birth is not yet sealed up in identity. There, every subject loses its mastery and its method. The pathway has been neither indicated nor prepared, unless in the call to a future that is offered by, and to, the other in the abandonment of self. Causing the possibles to recede, thanks to an intimacy that keeps on unfolding itself, opening and reopening the pathway to the mystery of the other.

Thus a new birth comes about, a new dawn for the loved one. And for the lover. The blooming of a face whose form was not yet sculpted. Opened up from having flowed to the depths of what nourishes it again and again. Not a mask given or attributed once and for all, but an efflorescence that detaches itself from its immersion and absorption in the night's most secret place. Not without scintillations. The light that shines there is different from the one that makes distinctions and separates too neatly.

Is this to say that the loved one – and the lover – find themselves thus in reversed positions from inside to outside? No. Rather, what is most interior and what is most exterior become mutually fecund. Prior to any procreation.

The son does not resolve the enigma of the most irreducible otherness. Of course, he is not engendered without having had his place in the crypt of the loved one's womb. Where the lover falters, and whence he returns, without any possible recognition or vision of this terrain. Does the son appear to the father as the impossible image of his act of love?

But, before the son appears, the loved one's fulfillment tells him, shows him, the mystery of fecundity. Looking again at the woman he has loved, the lover may contemplate the work of fecundation. And, if the loved one's – and the beloved's – surrender means a childlike trust, an animal exuberance, it illuminates the aesthetics and ethics of the amorous gesture, for those who take the time to reopen their eyes.

The loved one's beauty announces the fulfillment of the flesh. More beautiful, or differently beautiful, after lovemaking than in all her shows and finery. The most intimate fecundity of love, of its caress, of getting beyond all restraints on this side of the other's threshold, is preferred in this parousia – silently. Admiration for what is reborn from the heart's depths through a new conception. Regenerated by having gone back, with him, beyond the fixed, deadly due date of her birth? Returned to the acceptance of her life by the lover and accompanied on this side of, and beyond, a given day of reckoning.

Prior to any procreation, the lovers bestow on each other – life. Love fecundates each of them in turn, through the genesis of their immortality. Reborn, each for the other, in the assumption and absolution of a definitive conception. Each one welcoming the birth of the other, this task of beginning where neither she nor he has met – the original infidelity. Attentive to the weakness that neither the one nor the other could have wished for, they love each other like the bodies that they are. Not irremediably diminished by

having been born in different times and places nor by having lived prior to their mutual union and generation.

The mystery of relations between lovers is more terrible, but infinitely less deadly, than the destruction of submission to sameness. Than all relationships of inclusion or penetration that bar the way to that nourishment that is more intimate than all other nourishments, given in the act of love.

Sameness, quantitatively polemical when it comes to its place, occupies my flesh, demarcates and subdivides my space, lays siege to and sets up camp on my horizon – making it uninhabitable for me and inaccessible for the lover.

Porosity, and its utter responsiveness, can only occur within difference. Porosity that moves from the inside to the outside of the body. The most profound intimacy becoming a protective veil. Turning itself into an aura that preserves the nocturnal quality of the encounter, without masks. The distance of the impenetrable in the clarity of daylight. Of that which perceives without ever looking at itself. Crossing itself like a threshold occasionally, while touching and being touched by the other, but is forgotten and recollected.

How to remember the flesh? Above all, what is or becomes the site/source that makes it possible to remember? The place of a possible unfolding of its temporality? Burial ground of the touch that metabolizes itself in the constitution of time. Secret fold stitched into the other's time. Eternity of the other?

While there remains the mystery of the touch that goes beyond touching, the intention of every gesture, how can one recall this permanence? Become it as one recollects it? Make time of this source of time? Arrive at this nocturnal temporalization of touch?

Without face? The face swallowed up by the nocturnal experience of touching, touching each other, retouching. Veiled by that which is situated only beyond the project. Invisible because it must defend itself unceasingly from the visible and the night. Both of them.

The loved one, the beloved, emerges from all disguises. No longer rigid within a deadly freedom, but left to a still possible growth. To a face without habits, which allows itself to be seen in order to be reborn beyond what has already appeared. And, in the imperfection, the unfinished state of all who are alive.

In that place, there is no discovery to scrutinize. That which lets itself go in the most intimate touch remains invisible. Touch perceives itself but transcends the gaze. And the question of creating nakedness. Touch never shows itself, not even if its exactness could thus be made manifest. Reaching the other, or not. But it remains palpable flesh on this side of, and beyond, the visible.

Analyzed in images and photographs, a face loses the mobility of its expressions, the perpetual unfolding and becoming of what is alive. Gazing at the loved once, the lover reduces her to less than nothing if this gaze is seduced by an image, if her nudity, not perceived in its ever unceasing palpitation, becomes the site of a disguise rather than of wonder at that which does not stop its inward movement. The loved one's vulnerability is this unguarded quality of the living, revealed in a form that is never definitive. If he thinks he leaves her like a dead body, could it be that the lover discovers in her what is terrible about the limits of nudity, or dredges up what he needs to move on to a place beyond what is alive?

The face, or at least a certain conception, idea, or representation of it, can be swallowed up in the act of love. A new birth, which deconstitutes and reconstitutes contemplation by returning to the source of all the senses – the sense of touch. There is no longer any image there, except for that of letting go and giving of self. With the hands, among other ways. Sculpting, shaping, as if for the first time, on the first day. The loved one would be engulfed in infancy or animality only in order to be reborn from there as flesh reshaped inside and out. Innocent of absorption in self and of self? Encounter across a threshold that differs from the irreversible one of mortal birth. Approach, communion, and regenerating fecundation of the flesh that touches itself on an ever more distant horizon, repeating, and going beyond, the original conception.

Also surpassing the corruption of what has already been seen. Return to a certain night whence the lovers can arise, differently illuminated and enlightened. They give themselves to each other and abandon what has already been created. By themselves and by reason. Opening to an innocence that runs the risk of folding back on itself in defense of the past. In this gesture, each one runs the risk of annihilation, murder, or resuscitation.

Lovers' faces live not only in the face but in the whole body. A form that is expressed in and through their entire stature. In its appearance, its touch. A *morphe* in continual gestation. Movements ceaselessly reshaping this incarnation.

The lovers meet in one moment of this incarnation. Like sculptors who are going to introduce themselves, entrust themselves to one another for a new delivery into the world.

And all the senses share in the nature of the caress. The hand serving, in its way, as the most intimate means of approach.

There the beloved is not subjected to alternations of fire and ice. Mirror or frost that the lover would have to pass through to reach the loved one. Given back to her own movements, to the demonstration of her charms, she also revives herself in the warmth and does not simply receive it from the other. Waiting without becoming rigid, she does not close herself in

or up in any sepulchre of images or any project that denies her dynamism. She tends towards her own fulfillment, already unfolds herself to gather in more.

Thus, neither the one nor the other will take the initiative of plucking in order to contemplate. Both are contemplative and blossoming. Opening and closing themselves, in order to keep giving each other that which they could never have brought to life. Each one moving along the path to some in-finite, which trembles in the encounter without closing itself up or making decisions according to the limiting dimensions of some transcendental value to be attained.

The beloved falls back into infancy or beyond, while the lover rises up to the greatest heights. Impossible match. Chain of links connecting, from one end to the other, an ascension in which the one and the other do not wed, except in the inversion of their reflections.

When the lover loses himself in a regress through the voluptuousness of the loved one, he remains within her as an abyss, or an unfathomable depth. Both of them lost, each in the other, on the wrong side, or the other side, of transcendence.

The loved one. Not the beloved. Necessarily an object, not a subject in touch, like him, with time. Dragging the lover down into the abyss so that, from these nocturnal depths, he lets himself be carried off into an absolute future.

The loved one sinks into the abyss, founders in a night more primeval than the night, or finds herself dispersed in the shards of a broken mirror. The pearls of ice or frost that are her reflection making a screen for love? From the brilliance of her finery? Desired by the lover, in and through herself. She is removed from the place of greatest tenderness. Bidding her to freeze into the shapes that separate her from herself. Deprived of the suppleness of her amorous mobility, torn away from the source of respiration, which is also cosmic, where she moves in harmony with the fecundity of nature. For her, a living mirror. Tuned differently to the rhythm of the earth and the stars. Intimately tied to universal motions and vibrations that go beyond any enclosure within reproduction. Turning in a cycle that never revolves back to sameness. Continual and patient engendering of an obscure labor. More passive than any voluntary passivity, but not foreign to the act of creating-procreating the world. Within her something takes place, between earth and sky, in which she participates as in a continual gestation, a mystery yet to be deciphered. Heavy with her destiny.

When the lover relegates her to infancy, animality, or maternity, he leaves unsolved, in part, this mystery of a relation to the cosmos. What is lacking is participation in the construction of a world that does not forget natural generation and the human being's part in the preservation of its efflorescence. A gestation in which the subjective microcosm, does not need to

nourish, shelter, and fecundate itself by means of a macrocosm about which it no longer cares. Believing that it is given once and for all, to be exploited endlessly, carelessly irretrievably. Cultivating one's already-enclosed garden. The work of a landlord, without regard for the natural world that makes fecundity possible, without God's concern for this universe of incarnation, for the harmony of its allurements.

Separating her off into the subterranean, the submarine, stone and airborne flight lacking the sparkle of light and fire. Dismissed to a perpetual future. Forgetting that which already persists here, now – already hidden or still buried. Uprooting the beloved from her fundamental habitat.

Annexing the other, in all his/her dimensions and directions, in order to capture him/her, captivate him/her, in a language that possesses as its chief, and internal, resources only the consumption, consummation, and speed of its contradictions. Deployment of a network that extends over everything and deprives it of its most intimate breath and growth. A garment that first and foremost paralyzes the other's movement. Protecting it, like the shield of the hero who defends the loved one from the conquest of some rival.

But how does one stay alive beneath this shield? What future is left for one who is so hemmed in? Even if she plays, within this male territory, at disguising herself in numerous displays, various coquetties, which he will interpret as part of love, she remains without an identity or a passport with which to traverse, to transgress, the lover's language. A more or less domesticated child or animal that clothes itself or takes on a semblance of humanity? Carrying on the subject's involuntary movements, veiling them in softness, in folds, in spaciousness to give him back some room. Wrapping itself up in the remainder of what he has taken in and from love. But what of her call to the divine?

About this he has little to say. And, since she is not to speak when he renders her profane in voluptuousness, is he not also sacrilegious vis-à-vis God? The "God" of lightness, of the "incarnate," the God of life – of the air, . . . blood, and . . . maternity of the son who appears in the "form" of the cloud accompanying the tablets of the law. The lover would take this God into his discourse and beyond, not allowing him the freedom of his future manifestations. He invokes this God but does not perceive him where, in the here and now, he is already held out/withheld: in the beloved's sensibility. In the creation that she perpetuates, while preserving her intimacy, her inviolability, her virginity. God of the universe, God of the fecundity of a future coming, which is also preserved in the beloved.

The lover also summons her to God when he does not reduce, or seduce, her to his needs. Also regressive, she is infantile and animal, for him? Irresponsible in order to give him back freedom.

This lightness of amorous gestures and deeds makes one forget that the beloved loved one's self-abandonment is inspired by the most absolute

trust in the transcendence of life. Still in the future, always being reborn. Allowing herself to let go into the nocturnal, she calls forth from there a new morning, a new spring, a new dawn. The creation of a new day? To the source of a light that goes behind and beyond that of reason.

God's first act of creation? Before peopling the sky and the earth. An illumination that precedes any role in the organization, the ordering – of a world. A contemplation prior to any vision. An opening on a less-than-nothing that is not nothing – light. Ultimate incorporation of the newborn man. The first discovery once out of the womb, or in regeneration. Matter without which no creation of form is possible, light is the chance of emergence out of chaos and shapelessness.

Returning to the depth of the night, the beloved waits for light – the light that shines through discourse, that filters through words, that bestows a sense of the cosmos, but also that which is illuminated in the grace of regeneration and transfiguration? Giving herself to nature to be reborn from there, fecund – within herself. A son, perhaps (but why a son and not a daughter, her other self?), but also hers by him. Fecundity of a love that gives itself over, above and beyond reason – at the source of light. There where things have not yet taken their places but remain possible. Future. Still germinating, growing, being revealed. The beloved will have to cultivate the intimacy (the seed?) of this fecundity and the path from the most hidden part of the night to the efflorescence of the day.

When the loved one presents herself and appears to the lover as a paradise to be brought back to infancy and animality, then the act of love signifies a profanation, but also a deposition. Causing her to be dragged down. The loved one would be relegated to the abyss so that the lover might be sent back to the heights. The act of love would amount to contact with the irrationality of discourse, in order to send the loved one back to the position of fallen animal or infant, and to man's ecstasy in God. Two poles that are indefinitely separate. But such is – perhaps – the loved one's secret: she knows, without knowing, that these two extremes are intimately connected.

Beneath her veils, she keeps secret watch over a threshold. A slight opening onto the depths or abysses of all language, of all birth and generation. It is up to the lover to discover, or perceive, there the fall into amorphousness or the astonishment of that which has not yet been given form or revealed from above. To bring about, with her, and not through or in spite of her, the assumption of the flesh. Instead of leaving her to her own profanation, her despoiling, to reconstitute again and again only her virginity. To wrap herself up in a *something beyond* all humanity? While the lover leads her back to the *not yet* of the infant, the *never like that* of the animal – outside of any human becoming. Separating himself from her, once this gesture has been made, to return to his ethical responsibilities.

In this sense, the loved one, she who renounces her obligations as the beloved, succumbs to the temptation of being seduced by the lover. She divests herself of her own will to love, in order to make herself the stake in the lover's exercise of will. Which assigns her to the place of nonwilling in his ethical will. Her fall into the lover's identity cancels out any real giving of self and makes her into a thing, or something other than *the woman* that she needs to be. She lets herself be taken but does not give herself. She quits the locus of all responsibilities, her own ethical site. She is placed under house arrest, lacking the will and movements of love. Except for the expectation and cure for profanation? For the fall into the abyss? Gathering around herself and wrapping herself with what was secretly entrusted to her – without his knowledge. Barely moving at all, but deploying around herself garments for protection and display. Her paralysis, where the dance is concerned, runs the risk of resignation from all amorous creation, except that of remaining desirable. The guardian of the source and secret of her appeal. Without responsibility for bringing to life that something more than the seduction of man in the hidden side of himself? For the unveiling of a difference that would remain coupled with him in the night.

If she comes back to herself, in herself, to himself in her, she may feel that another parousia is necessary. Having to create, give birth to, engender, the mystery that she bears – prior to any conception of a child. No longer staying within the grasp of the one who draws upon the mystery, but taking charge – yes, she herself – of bringing it to light. Engendering love prior to, as something more than, the son. And the daughter.

Generating her space, her site, with the lover. Remaining on the threshold, which is always receding and in the future, of a mystery that she ought to reveal under pain of ethical dereliction? The lover would help her in this parturition, if he does not simply send her back to the abyss. The one for the other, messengers of a future that must still be built and contemplated. The one for the other, already known and still unknown. The one for the other, the mediators of a secret, a force, and an order that touches also on the divine.

Occasionally going their separate ways, meeting again, linking up again, in order not to lose their attentiveness to what transcends their already actual becoming. Listening to what has never taken place, nor found its place but that calls to be born.

This simultaneousness of concupiscence and transcendence is traditionally represented by the angel – the divine messenger. Not foreign to desire and anger, in some dimension that is not one of need.

But here, voluptuousness would hold fast to the fate of an exorbitant ultramateriality fallen away from discourse. Never brought to fruition nor fulfilled in its transcendence. Captive of a destiny, without remission. Of an

original sin without possible redemption? Manifesting itself beyond the word, beyond and in spite of reason. Beyond all measures.

For the lover, the transcendence of the other justifies this infidelity of love. Returning to his God in a discontinuity of *eros*. If it were not for pardon.

And what of the beloved? Grace for what has not yet gone sufficiently far into the future nor been sufficiently faithful in the moment, for what remained unfinished, left over. Remission of deprivation, of distress, of expectation, which measures out the chronology of the lovers' unions and separations. Each one fulfilling the cycles of his/her solitude to come back to the other, wounded perhaps, but free of a possible return because of the pardon that each gives. Allowing one to become detached from self and from the other. Renewal of the attraction that is also nourished in the suspense of reconciliation. There, sacrifice is neither sacrifice of nor mourning for the one or the other but absolution for what was not perfect. A marker in time that opens up to infinity, without sending it back to an origin or a goal deprived of an access, a threshold.

The flesh of the rose petal – sensation of the mucous membrane regenerated. Between blood, sap, the not yet of efflorescence. Joyous mourning for the winter past. New baptism of springtime. Return to the possible of intimacy, of its fecundity, fecundation.

But time enters in. Too much involved in numbers and in what has already been. And how to repair, in a second, an evil that has lasted for such a long time? Call to the other from a starting point of virginity, without a trace of scar or mark of pain and self-enclosure? Love the other above and beyond any labor of healing.

And when others continually interfere with this expectation of union, how to maintain a candor that neither cries out for remission nor burdens the lover with the task of healing wounds?

But does the lover not ask the loved one to efface, again and again, an original wound of which she would be the bearer? The suffering of an open body that cannot clothe itself with and in her, unless the lover is united with her, in the joy and not the sacrifice, of the most intimate mucous threshold in the dwelling place. Crossing the threshold, being no longer a profanation of the temple but an entrance into another, more secret space. Where the beloved receives and offers the possibility of nuptials. An inebriation unlike that of the conqueror, who captures and dominates his prey. Inebriation of the return to the garden of innocence, where love does not yet know or no longer knows, or has forgotten, the profanity of nakedness. The gaze still innocent of the limits of reason, the division of day and night, the alternation of the seasons, animal cruelty, the necessity of protecting oneself from the other or from God. Face to face encounter of two naked lovers

in a nudity that is older than, and unlike, a sacrilege. Not perceivable as profanation. The threshold of the garden, a welcoming cosmic home, that remains open. No guard other than that of love itself. Innocent of the knowledge of displays and the fall.

Intuition without an end, intuition that does not mark out but inscribes itself in an already insistent field. A prehensive intuition, which inhales from the air something of what is already there to come back to itself?

The loved one would be she who keeps herself available in this way. Offering to the other what he can put to his own use? Opening the path of his return to himself and of his own future? Giving him back time?

When the loved one perceives the lover in this way, does she inscribe herself in a moment of her trajectory as he arrives at a moment of his own? He believes that she is drawing him down into the abyss; she believes that he is cutting himself off from her to constitute his transcendence. Their paths cross but achieve neither an alliance nor a mutual fecundation. Except for the lover, whose double is – the son.

The loved one relegated to an inwardness that is not one because it is abysmal, animal, infantile, prenuptial; and the lover, to a solitary call to his God. At both poles distant from the living, they do not wed each other. They occupy the contrapuntal sites of human becoming. The one watches over the substratum of the elementary, of generation, but the act of love would scatter her among the archaic moments of earth, sea, and airborne flight. Caressing her to reach the infinity of her center, the lover undoes her, divests her of her tactility – a porosity that opens up to the universe – and consigns her to the regression of her womanly becoming, always in the future. Forgetful of the fecundity, in the here and now, of lovemaking: the gift to each of the lovers of sexual birth and rebirth.

Taking the other into oneself during lovemaking creates an inordinate separation. There is no opportunity to mourn an impossible identification. Attraction in union, and the chance of its fecundity.

Revealed only in the son, it continues to mask itself as the fecundation of the lovers in difference. As the fruit of the communion between lover and beloved, the son becomes the lover's ornament and display of the same as self, the position of the lover's identity in relation to, and through, paternity.

Conceived in this way, the son does not appear as the fulfillment of love. He bars the way to its mystery? The aspect of fecundity that is only witnessed in the son obliterates the secret of difference. As the lover's means of return to himself outside himself, the son closes the circle. The path of a solitary ethics that will have encountered, for its own need, without nuptial fulfillment, the irresponsible woman, the loved one.

When recognized only in the son, love and voluptuousness bespeak the lover's vulnerability, on the threshold of difference. His retreat and his

appeal to his genealogy, his future as a man, his horizon, society, and security. Turning around in a world that remains his own. Contained within and by himself, without a dwelling for the beloved, except for the shelter that she gives to the son – prior to his birth.

If the lover needs to prove himself in voluptuousness, it is in order to sink down into his own otherness/the other of himself. To put down the night side of himself, which he covers up in the reasonable habitat of his life and from which he gains, as he emerges, the form of his highest ascension. The body of the loved one(s) (*l'aimé-aimée*), approached by caresses, is abandoned on the threshold of the nuptials. There is no union. The seduction of the loved one serves as a bridge between the Father and the son. In her, only an aspect of himself, the lover goes beyond love and voluptuousness, towards the ethical.

In this frailty as in the dawn rises the Loved, who is the Loved one [*l'Aimé qui est Aimée*]. An epiphany of the Loved, the feminine is not added to an object and a Thou antecedently given or encountered in the neuter (the sole gender formal logic knows). The epiphany of the Loved one is but one with her *regime* of tenderness.²

The loved one's fragility and weakness are the means for the lover to experience self-love, as a loved one who is powerless. The flesh of which he would remain the very body.

Touching that which is not contained within the limits of his flesh, of his body, the lover risks an infinite outpouring in dead being. He who has no connection to his own death puts the other at a permanent risk of loss of self in the wrong infinity.

Touching can become a limit, also, to the reabsorption of the other into the same. Giving the other its contours, calling it to its contours, means inviting the other to live where she is without becoming other, without appropriating herself.

But he who encounters only self as object in the loved one caresses himself under the disguise of a greater passivity? Adorning and inhabiting it with his own affects? Eventually giving to it the tactile *there is* (*il y a*), caught up in his own subjectivity. Aporia of a tactility that cannot caress itself and needs the other to touch itself.

The threshold is still missing. The access to the most mucous part of the dwelling.

Circumscribing the abyss is the unavoidable alterity of the other. Its absolute singularity. To be protected prior to any positioning or affirmation of another transcendence? The transcendence of "God" can help in the discovery of the other as other, locus where expectation and hope hold themselves in reserve.

Dwelling place, which becomes that of the matrix of the lover's identity. She, having no place of her own? Hiding her dereliction in terror or irony, she calls for complicity with something other than profanation, animality, infancy. She calls – and sometimes in her dispersion – to the feminine that she already is, secretly. Wanting to give herself over without resignation or violation of her intimacy.

Modesty is not found on one side only. Responsibility for it should not go to only one of the lovers. To make the loved one responsible for the secret of desire is to situate her also, and primarily on the side of the lover – in his own modesty and virginity, for which he won't take ethical responsibility.

The beloved's task would be to watch over two virginities, at least? Hers and the son's, to whom the lover delegated the part of himself that is still virginal. A walk in the dark, of course. The lover also seeks himself in this passage where, for him, the threshold cannot be crossed, from the not yet to the still future. Searching, in infancy and animality, for some moment whose obscure attraction remains insistent inside himself. Call to an obscure night that is neither a return to immersion in the mother nor profanation of the loved one's secret, but the weight of his own mystery.

But, if some God obliterates respect for the other as other, this God stands as the guarantee of a deadly infinity. As a resource of life and of love, the divine can only aid and further the fulfillment of the relation with the other. Provide the audacity of love. Encourage the risk of encountering the other with nothing held in reserve.

The fecundity of God would be witnessed in the uncalculating generosity with which I love, up to the point of risking myself with the other. Amorous folly that gives back to the other its last veil, in order to be reborn on another horizon. The lovers becoming cocreators of new worlds.

The lovers. Since to define the amorous couple as lover and *loved one* already assigns them to a polarity that deprives the woman of her love. Object of concupiscence, of the concupiscible, appeal to the alterity of the night or to the regression to need, she is no longer she who also opens partway onto a human landscape. She is part of the lover's world. Keeping herself on the threshold, perhaps. Causing the limits of her world or of her country to founder, to be swallowed up. But remaining passive within the field of activity of a subject who wishes himself to be the sole master of desire. Leaving him, apparently, the whole of voluptuousness, leaving him to a debasement without recourse to herself. What is left for him is dependence upon the son in order to continue on his path.

Thus, the God, like the son, would serve as a prop during the man's ethical journey, neglecting to keep for the beloved the light of her return to self. He looks at her before plunging her into the night of his *jouissance*, his

infantile or animal regression. But is it not between God and son that he takes her and annuls her as other? That he profanes her in his transcendence and his relation to the divine?

Voluptuousness would remain that which does not know the other. That which seduces itself, through her, in order to return to the abyss and take up ethical seriousness again. Not maintaining itself in the encounter with an other who is accountable, and for pleasure. But undoing this responsibility in the thoughtlessness of voluptuousness. A shore of indifference that brings repose from ethical fidelity?

Is not the most terrible demand of the ethical played out in that scene? Because it is a confrontation, here and now, with the mystery of the other. Tied to a past and a future of incarnation. Modesty being a sign of an intimacy that calls for, even begs for, a return. A supplication that calls, wordlessly, to reappear, beyond the immersion, in a light that has not yet occurred.

To give, or to give back to the other the possible site of his identity, of his intimacy: a second birth that returns one to innocence. A garment that isn't, but is rather an enveloping which again and again watches over a space for birth – becoming other than the return to self. A becoming in which the other gives of a space-time that is still free. In which he reentrusts me to a genesis that is still foreign to what has already happened.

A gesture that is more modest than the caress. A caress that precedes every caress, opening up to the other the possible space of his respiration, his conception. Greeting him as other, encountering him while respecting what surrounds him – that subtle, palpable horizon in which each person keeps himself within a necessary surrounding, an irradiation of his presence that overflows the limits of his body. Capable of more than the “I can” of the body itself.

This caress would start off from a distant point. A tact that informs the sense of touch, attracts, and comes to rest on the threshold of the approach. Neither paralyzing nor breaking in, the lovers would beckon to each other, at first from far away. A salutation that means the crossing of a threshold. Pointing out the space of a love that has not yet been profaned. The entrance into the dwelling, or the temple, where each one would invite the other, and themselves, to enter in, also into the divine.

Not divided into alliances between highest and lowest, the extremes of day and night, but involving these ultimate sites at the risk of the union and fecundation of each by the other. A passage through the loss of the individual body, through the surrender of the “I can” that opens up a future without the sacrifice of the one to the other. Creation of the love that does not resign from its respect for the ethical.

This union does not forget about voluptuousness but sounds it out in its most vertiginous and most sublime dimensions. Not divided into elements

belonging to different domains, the lovers meet as a world that each one reassembles and both resemble. Inhabiting it and dressing it differently. The lover and the beloved's horizons being irreducible.

The loved one – called a child or an animal – is also she who holds the highest note. Whose voice carries the farthest, is the finest, the strongest.

Her fall into the abyss would refer to the loss of her voice. To not listening to her song. To forgetting her vocalism. The loved one would be mute, or reduced to speaking in the spaces between the consonants of the lover's discourse. The loved one relegated to his shadow, his double, that which he does not yet know or recognize in himself, presenting itself to him under the guise of the loved one. Disguising for him the space of the present. An engulfing of his authority in the present, which clings to memory and the song of the beloved. Whom he sends back down to the abyss so that he may rebound into the transcendent. Manifest in and through writing. Absent and awaited in spirit. Whose voice would have been silent for a long time. A seriousness that is hard to maintain, which history would try to rediscover, reuncover through the text.

Neither wishing, nor being able, to see himself in this body that he is no longer, the lover would appear to himself in an other, her, mystery of the site of his disappearance. In order to keep the secret, she must keep quiet, no song or laughter. Her voice would give her away. Reveal that she is not what the lover thinks or searches for. That she is only a cover for what he is seeking, through and despite her.

Before parousia occurs, silence occurs. A silence that rehearses oblivion and that is only filled by music. The voice of she who sings and calls to the lover is still missing there. Stifled by the noise of instruments and of nature running wild. Or abandoned to prostitution.

Unless she, too, disguises herself, under the guise of an angel? Neuter? Perhaps. An interval that speaks between spouse and spirit? Neither the one nor the other expressing themselves. Unless through the mediation of the angelic order.

The expectation of parousia would also mean the death of speech between the sexual partners of the scene. Which foretells the terrible aspect of a new cosmic chaos and the disappearance of the gods. The hope of a new pentecost? Of the spirit's coming to the spouse in the joy of a different union.

The feminine would remain in search of its cause and sought out as a cause, but never thought through as such. Always relegated to another kind of causality. At best, defined qualitatively. Adjectives or ornaments of a verb whose subject they can never be.

The *logos* would maintain itself between the verb and the substantive. Leaving out the adjective? A mediation between the act and its result. The place of attraction? The place of the loved one – masculine/feminine – would be between loving and love. The lovable. Approachable in its realm of tenderness.

The two philosophical gestures would come down to laying the foundation, unfolding, and surrounding that which founds itself: acting and constituting the substantive of the act. Closure of an era. The partly open would be remembered in the qualities. Of the loved one. Already passive appearances or attributes? Over which she keeps watch, however, as they resist being taken up into matter.

Would not the loved one's appeal signify that which is not yet rigidified in the hardness of a name/noun or the seal of a signature? Between the act and the work would be situated what opens up to a future the lover does not understand as the work of love, but as the lightness of voluptuousness. The repository of certain characteristics that the lover does not maintain when he is loved. The loved one's significance derives from this less than nothing, a substitution that does not divulge itself. Brought into a world not his own, so that the lover may enjoy himself and recover his strength for his voyage towards an autistic transcendence. Allowing him, in the quest for a God already inscribed but voiceless, not to constitute the ethical site of lovemaking? A seducer, seduced by the gravity of the other and only approaching the other, feminine, carelessly. Taking away her light to illuminate his path. Without regard for what shines and glistens between them. Whether he wills it or not, knows it or not, turning the divine light to the illumination of reason or to the invisibility of "God."

Meanwhile, he will have taken away from the loved one this visibility that she offers him, which gives him strength, and he will have sent her back to the nocturnal. He will have stolen her gaze from her. And her song. Her attraction for the divine that becomes incarnate – in the light, in the contemplation of the universe and the other. The divine revealed in its also sensible dimensions. Having already appeared and still to come, and which beauty would call to mind? A half opening. A threshold. Also between past and future. The lover stealing her desire away from her, to adorn his world that preceded love, to spark his voluptuousness and aid his ascension, following the lightness of a fulfillment that did not take place in the encounter between them. A union, or wedding, broken off twice – at least. In display and in degeneration. No "human" flesh having been celebrated in that *eros*.

Not taking into account his own limits, the lover penetrates a flesh that he consummates and consumes without attention to the sacrificial gesture. He "takes communion" without rites or words. Is absorbed into nothing –

unless it is his other? Without detectable transition. Without a trace of this rape. If it were not for the exhaustion and suffering of the loved one. Reduced to infancy, left to herself or to animal savagery.

Confounding the one and the other, bending them to the same logic, the lover does not know the irreducible strangeness of the one and the other. Between the one and the other. Approaching the other to reduce it to that which is not yet human in himself. Voluptuousness that does not take place in the realm of the human. Will not be its work. Neither ethical nor aesthetic.

Placing in the other a trust that goes beyond his possibles, the beloved is relegated to a vertiginous dereliction. Opening herself up to the most intimate point of her being, to the most profound depths of her inwardness, but not retouched and sent back to the most sublime part of herself, she gives way to a night without end. The invitation to inhabit this dwelling being a call to communion in the secret depths of the sensible and not to a defloration of the woman that she is.

The loved one's face radiates the secret that the lover touches upon. Shining with a new light, bathing in a horizon that goes beyond the intention, it says [*dit*] what is hidden without exhausting it in a meaning [*un vouloir dire*]. It fills up with a nothing to say that is not nothing – thanks to the already and the not yet. A taking shape of matter that precedes any articulation in a language. Growth of the plant, animal expectation, sculptor's roughcast. Aesthetic matrix that does not yet reproduce but testifies to itself in a prerequisite to all completed gestures.

The caress seeks out the not yet of the beloved's blossoming. That which cannot be anticipated because it is other. Unforseeability bordering on alterity, beyond one's own limits. Beyond the limits of one's "I can." Irreducible to the other's presence, which is off into an always in the future that indefinitely suspends parousia. Always to come [*à venir*], the other would only maintain the lover in self-love even while making himself loved. Thus resigning from his ethical site, to she who is an opening of, and to, another threshold.

The loving act is neither an explosion nor an implosion but an indwelling. Dwelling with the self, and with the other – while letting him/her/it go. Remembering, while letting be, and with the world. Remembering the act, not as a simple discharge of energy but as a quality of intensity, sensation, color, rhythm. The intensity would be, or would constitute, the dimensions of the dwelling, always in becoming. Never finished. Unfolding itself during and between the terms of encounters.

If the loved one is relegated to infancy and animality, love remains without a dwelling. For the lover as well, who desires the ethical in a return

to some transcendent. Building this site in a nostalgia for an inaccessible here and now of love and voluptuousness?

Pleasure is never conceived as an instance of power in act. It expresses itself as an exit, from itself, when tied to the instant, dispersing or rarefying our being – while managing an evasion. It is presented as an amputation of being's ecstasy and not as a fulfillment that surpasses its destiny in the past and in the future. Freeing from being through the affective. Thought as a break, a paroxysm whose promises cannot be kept, a disappointment and a deception in its internal becoming. Doomed to shame through its inability to measure up to the exigencies of need. Never up to what is expected. Never ethical.

In the clamorous display of a presence that foretells nothing, except for its own emptiness, remaining impassive in order to turn to new values, new horizons, without falling into the trap set for a relapse into what has already been seen, known. The impatience of the one who wants something else not being on the same register, musically, with the noise of the one who cries out that he wants me no longer to want. To want what he wants or to nourish myself on his desires, where I can only do so at the price of giving up my incarnation.

An attacking and aggressive appeal from the other, who lets me know that he can no longer tolerate not expressing his will. That he is hungry for my hunger. Is ready to destroy it, in order not to have to hear the place where his hunger might take place – his appeal to the infinite, the unappeasable, the always more. Whose weight he must bear in separation, so that I can take communion with him in a dimension that watches over the mystery of the absolute, without abolishing it. In a demand for regressive nurturing, for example.

The lives of the one and the other are at stake. A future is only possible if this respect for limits is granted, also in the instant. If my hunger is not always turned back in the uncertainty about the other's hunger. If he leaves me to the openness of my quest without absorbing me into his thirst for nothing, or even stifling what I am silently. To exist alone?

One might as well say, to die? To produce, to produce himself instead of me? This impossibility, at once contemptible in its approach and insistent in its manifestations, can cut off my inspiration with its violence. For all that, however, he does not discover its source.

Forgetting that I exist as a desiring subject, the other transforms his need into desire. Desire for nothing – the abolition of the other's willing, which would become a nonwilling. Unless it is for a transcendent – other of the same.

In this way, voluptuousness finds itself set adrift forever. The distraction of transfiguration, transmutation, resurrection. An infinite substitution

and spelling out of appearances, the masks falling without parousia? An illumination capable of being buried under showiness, but not signifying a return either to animality or to infancy.

Does the lover not lay upon the loved one what he cannot see in himself? What prevents him from becoming what he is, and from being able to encounter her, herself? Wrapping her up in what he cannot bear of his own identity, he places her, secretly, in the maternal position. A destiny, or maya, hidden in its identifying strata. A net that he cannot pass through and that he lays upon her, in order to rend it – fictitiously. He discovers nothing. And if she surrenders as a child or animal, her finery fallen, God becomes even more transcendent, inaccessible. Out of reach.

Might not the infinitesimal but impassable distance in our relation to death then be that which would take place in the touching of the female sex? Whence the assimilation of the feminine to the other? And the forgetting of a vital threshold – the tactile.

It is the place of my concentration and of his opening out, without vain dispersion, that constitutes a possible habitation. Turning back on itself and protecting me until the next encounter. A sort of house that shelters me without enclosing me, untying and tying me to the other, as to one who helps me to build and inhabit. Discharging me from a deadly fusion and uniting me through an acknowledgement of who is capable of producing this place. My pleasure being, in a way, the material, one of the materials.

Architects are needed. Architects of beauty who fashion enjoyment – a very subtle material. Letting it be and building with it, while respecting the approach, the threshold, the intensity. Inciting it to unfold without a show of force. Only an accompaniment? It only unfolds itself from being unfolded. It is in touch with itself from being touched touching itself. It must be able to persist. To continue to live in itself in order to live with. One must reach the heart of its habitation in order to cohabit. This heart being always in motion and, at the same time, not without a dwelling. A qualitative threshold makes it possible for love to last. For the lovers to be faithful? Not obeying it, the threshold wears out. The house of flesh, which allows them to remember each other, to call to each other – even from a distance – is destroyed.

Letting be and dwelling in the strength of becoming, letting the other go while dwelling contained and persevering, such is the wager that the beloved must make. Not holding back, but dwelling in what wraps itself around a nonforgetfulness. What is reborn, again and again, around a memory of the flesh. Flourishing again around what, in herself, has opened up and dispersed itself in seedlings. Seedlings that are fecund if the one, she who is unique, remembers this impossible memory. Attentive to a time always consecrated to the abyss. Adrift. In an infinite substitution.

There remain only the immemorial interuterine abode and trust in some other. Between blind nostalgia and ethical tension, the lover both loves and despises himself through the loved one (female) – who is the loved one (male). He both allures and rejects himself through this other. Himself assuming neither infancy nor animality.

The memory of touching always covered over by the senses, which forget where they come from? Creating a distance through a mastery that constitutes the object as a monument built instead of the subject's disappearance.

The memory of touching? The most persisting and the most difficult to make comply with memory. The one that brings about returns to an term, whose beginning and end cannot be recovered.

Memory of the flesh, where what has not yet been written is inscribed, laid down? What has no discourse to wrap itself in? What has not yet been born into language? What has a place, has taken place, but has no language. The felt, which expresses itself for the first time. Declares itself to the other in silence.

Remembering and hoping that the other remembers. Lodging it in a memory that serves as its bed and its nest, while waiting for the other to understand. Making a cradle for him inside and out while leaving him free, and keeping oneself in the memory of the strength that revealed itself, that acted.

Leaving free, giving an invitation to freedom, does not mean that the other wants it to be so. And lives in you, with you.

Far away, eventually. Avoiding the encounter, the approach that yields the limits of the flesh. Remaining at a distance, in order to annihilate the possibility of us?

A sort of abolishment of the other, in the loss of the body's borders. A reduction of the other – given up to consuming flesh for the other? Between the memory that preserves in expectation and respects the advent or the eventuality of the other and the memory that dissipates itself in assimilation, the commemoration is lacking upon which the flesh lives – in its mobility, its energy, its place of inscription, its still-virginal power.

Must one have a certain taste? A taste that does not exist or persist in any nourishment. A taste for the affective with, and for, the other. This taste that ought not to remain in an obscure nostalgia, but in an attention to what always forgets itself. As impossible to gratify? What does not exclude the savor of feeling without wanting to absorb or resolve. Between the body and the subtlety of the flesh, a bridge or place of a possible encounter, unusual landscape where union is approached?

It is a question here neither of the preciousness of a fetish nor of the celebratory perfume of some sacrifice. Before any construction of words, any encasement or destruction of idols and even of temples, something – not

reducible to what is ineffable in discourse – would keep itself close to the perception of the other in its approach.

The other not transformable into discourse, fantasies, or dreams, the other for whom it is impossible that I substitute any other, any thing, any god, through this touching of and by him, which my body remembers.

To each wound of separation, I would answer by refusing the holocaust, while silently bearing witness, for myself and for the other, that the most intimate perception of the flesh escapes every sacrificial substitution, every resumption in a discourse, every surrender to God. Flair or premonition between my self and the other, this memory of the flesh as the place of approach is ethical fidelity to incarnation. To destroy it risks suppressing alterity, both God's and the other's. Thus dissolving all possibility of access to transcendence.

Notes

- 1 In the original, Irigaray distinguishes between the feminine as passive *aimée* (here translated as "the loved one") and as active *amante* (here translated as "the beloved"), whose full engagement with the masculine *amant* ("the lover") cannot be rendered grammatically in English due to lack of gender. – Trans.
- 2 TeI 233/TI 256.

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LEVINAS' NOTION OF THE "THERE IS"¹

Philip Lawton

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Emmanuel Levinas' work, in this (as in other ways) reminiscent of Rosenzweig's and Buber's², gives a tripartite articulation to Being. The three dimensions or levels of existence are those of the *there is*, the "hypostatic" event of separation³, and the encounter with the Other. By way of a preliminary and approximative definition, – the *there is* is the milieu in which the self bathes before it is a self, and so before it is a subject of existence; it is the "elemental", the "indeterminate", the background of Being in which the self first discovers itself as a self and from which it thereby detaches itself to become a separate(d) being who can meet others. Levinas summarizes this movement in a passage in which he goes on to introduce the notion of time: "*There is* – impersonally – like *it's raining* or *night is falling* (*il fait nuit*). Light and *meaning* are born with the arising and position of existents in this horrible neutrality of the *there is*. They are on the track which leads from existence to the existent and from the existent to the other – track which sketches time itself . . ."⁴.

Our program in this brief paper is, first, to address a methodological problem involving Levinas' understanding of phenomenology; second, to consider the ideas of Heraclitus, Lévy-Bruhl and Bergson which, Levinas avers, contributed to the development of his notion of the *there is*; third, to examine Levinas' idea more directly and thematically; finally, to signal some further historical concordances (and discordances), in an effort to situate the notion in the literary and philosophical tradition in which it is inscribed.

I

A methodological problem (which is *eo ipso* substantive) impedes Levinas' efforts to describe the *there is*. The situation – where no one and nothing is,

however, situated – he is attempting to describe, is prior to the opposition of the knowing subject and the known object, – prior, that is, to the cognitive relation, because it is prior to cognition and to relation. Levinas is thus forced to give indications, *hints*, rather than expository descriptions, to rely on negative propositions (“the *there is* is not this, nor that”), and to withdraw every affirmative proposition even as he advances it⁵. This suggestion may serve as an illustration: “If the term experience were not inapplicable to a situation which is the absolute exclusion of light, we could say that the night is the very experience of the *there is*.”⁶ 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. In the Preface to *Totalité et infini*, Levinas makes some important remarks on this question of his use of the phenomenological method. If the reader will excuse the length of the citation, –

“... the presentation and the development of the notions employed (here) owe everything to the phenomenological method. Intentional analysis is the search for the concrete. Notions held under the direct gaze of the thought that defines them are nevertheless, unbeknown to this naive thought, revealed to be implanted in horizons unsuspected by this thought; these horizons endow them with a meaning – such is the essential teaching of Husserl.* What does it matter if in the Husserlian phenomenology taken literally these unsuspected horizons are in their turn interpreted as thoughts aiming at objects ! What counts is the idea of the overflowing of objectifying thought by a forgotten experience from which it lives. *The break-up of the formal structure of thought (the noema of a noesis) into events which this structure dissimulates but which sustain it and restore its concrete significance, constitutes a deduction – necessary and yet non-analytical.* In our exposition it is indicated by expressions such as ‘that is’, or ‘precisely’, or ‘this accomplishes that’, or ‘this is produced as that’ ”⁷.

It is evident from this passage that, despite the essential and constitutive inadequation of the phenomenological horizon, that is, despite the fact that in phenomenological description the object is never completely given to the perceiving or knowing subject, but always and necessarily promises another side⁸, Levinas finally ranges phenomenological language with the other totalizing languages of Western philosophy⁹. This interpretation of the Husserlian notion of horizon is comprehensible only in the larger context of Levinas’ thought. Mr. De Greef sees in Levinas’ work a passage (or a leap;

* Cf. our article “La ruine de la représentation” in *Edmund Husserl 1859–1959* (The Hague, 1959), pp. 73–85. (LEVINAS’ fn.).

the alternative is difficult) from the phenomenological to the ethical¹⁰, as the gradually redefined problem of the Same and the Other moved to the center of Levinas' thought. The egological language of phenomenological description finally proved not to be apt for presenting the relationship with the Other as an ethical, rather than a cognitive (and reductive) relationship: the idealistic correlation expressed by the terms noesis and noema, and the notion of intentionality as a constituting project, *my* project, threatened once again to reduce the Other to the Same, rather than to respect him in his irreducible alterity¹¹. "In the *Sinn-Gebung* of the other", writes Mr. De Greef, "the *Gebung* comes from the other to me, and is not a movement of donation of the consciousness that lends sense."¹² It can be argued persuasively that Husserl's description in the Fifth of his *Cartesianische Meditationen* of the analogical constitution the *alter ego* is eminently respectful in its attitude toward the other. That question, however, is ancillary to the present discussion. More immediately relevant is the question of Levinas' break with the phenomenological method which he continues, all the same, to employ.

The critical proposition, cited above, is that the "break-up of the formal structure of thought (the noema of a noesis) into events which this structure dissimulates, but which sustain it and restore its concrete significance, constitutes a *deduction* – necessary and yet non-analytical." As applied to the problem of the *there is*, this passage would seem to indicate that Levinas wishes to describe in phenomenological terms an event, a somehow prepersonal experience – the terms are impossible – which is deduced, rather than lived through; an event in existence which is dissimulated or dissembled by the cognitive structure itself, and so, inaccessible to thought, to reflection, but at the same time an event which "sustains" that structure and "restores its concrete significance"; in effect, an event which is a condition of possibility for the structure that denies it. To add paradox to paradox, this "deduction" is necessary but not analytic: if necessary and analytic have the same logical force, then it is a deduction which is not, strictly, a deduction, of an experience which is not, strictly, an experience¹³. Yet nonetheless a necessary deduction in the economy of Being (or at least in the economy of Levinas' thought).

In approaching the question of the *there is*, then, Levinas attempts to describe, or at least to indicate, in language a deduced experience that precedes language, precedes deduction, and precedes experience.

II

Levinas explicitly ties his notion of the *there is* to three ideas advanced in the history of philosophy: Heraclitus' idea of the flux of Being, Lévy-Bruhl's idea of prelogical participation, and Bergson's idea of nothingness.

Introducing the classic notion of the flux of Being, Levinas calls upon the image of the river "where, according to Heraclitus, one does not bathe

twice, and according to Cratylus not even once.”¹⁴ It is not, then, the flux of Being in which a being becomes, – not the notion of becoming, – which Levinas invokes, because there is in the *there is* not yet any principle of identity to support change. This refusal of the notion of becoming is thus not an affirmation of any supposed stability in the *there is*; it marks on the contrary an effort to think its flux, its motion, in a radical way.

Levinas approaches Lévy-Bruhl’s notion of prelogical participation indirectly, writing first of the horror of being, the distinct feeling of an indistinct, or indeterminate, menace – the horror of being threatened by something which is not anything, yet not nothing. The horror of the *there is*. “To be consciousness”, he writes,

“is to be torn from the *there is*, since the existence of a consciousness constitutes a subjectivity, because it is a subject of existence, that is, in a certain measure, master of being, already a name in the anonymity of the night. Horror is, in some way, a movement which will deprive consciousness of its very ‘subjectivity’. Not in appeasing it into the unconscious, but in precipitating it into an *impersonal vigilance*, into a participation, in the sense that Lévy-Bruhl gives to this term.”¹⁵

The novelty of Lévy-Bruhl’s idea of participation in its application to an existence where horror plays the role of the dominant emotion, and the aspect which recommends it to Levinas, is its destruction of the categories which previously had been employed to describe the sentiments excited by the sacred. For Durkheim, in Levinas’ reading, these sentiments remain those of a subject before an object; the identity of these terms, subject and object, is apparently not in question.

“It is entirely different for Lévy-Bruhl. In mystic participation, thoroughly distinct from Platonic participation in a *genus*, the identity of the terms is lost. They rob one another of that which constitutes their very substantivity. The participation of one term in another is not in the community of an attribute, one term *is the other*. The private existence of each term, mastered by the subject who is, loses this private character, returns to an indistinct ground; the existence of the one submerges the other, and, by that, is no longer the existence of the one. We recognize in it the *there is*.”¹⁶

Two further points on Levinas’ reprise of Lévy-Bruhl’s notion of prelogical participation. The impersonality of the sacred (or of the numinous) does not prepare the advent of a personal God: “Rather than to God, the notion of the *there is* lead us back to the absence of God, to the absence of every being. The primitives are absolutely before the Revelation, before the light.”¹⁷ And the horror of the *there is* is not at all Heidegger’s anguish at

being-for-death¹⁸. "The primitives are witness, according to Lévy-Bruhl, only to indifference concerning death as a natural fact. It is of his subjectivity, of his power of private existence, that the subject is deprived in horror. He is depersonalized. . . . It is, if one might say so, the impossibility of death, the universality of existence even in its annihilation"¹⁹, that horrifies: the horror is not fear of nothingness, but fear of Being.

Finally, Levinas suggests that when, "in the last chapter of *L'Evolution créatrice*, Bergson shows that the concept of nothingness is equivalent to the idea of Being crossed out (*l'idée de l'être biffé*), he seems to envision a situation analogous to that which leads us to the notion of the *there is*."²⁰ Being crossed out, not being erased: nothingness is; not the total absence of Being, it is rather the presence of absence. "Negation", continues Levinas,

"— which, according to Bergson, has a positive sense (or direction: *un sens positif*) as a movement of the mind which rejects one being to think another, — applied to the totality of Being, would no longer have any sense. To deny the totality of Being is, for consciousness, to plunge into a kind of obscurity where, at least, it remains as function, as consciousness of that obscurity. Total negation would therefore be impossible, to think nothingness — an illusion."²¹

Levinas' *entente* with Bergson is not, however, unreserved. Bergson's critique of the concept of nothingness aims, he objects, only at the necessity of a being (*un étant*), a something which exists; it approaches Being as a being and arrives at a residual being. The obscurity into which the negating consciousness plunges itself is understood as a content, and the fact that it is a content obtained by the negation of all content is not seriously considered.

"Yet, this is all the originality of the situation. Obscurity, — as the presence of absence, is not a content purely present. It is not a question of a 'something' that remains, but of the very atmosphere of presence, which certainly can appear afterwards as a content, but which, originally, is the impersonal, asubstantive event of the night and of the *there is*. It's like a density of emptiness, like a murmur of silence. There is nothing, but there is Being, like a field of forces. Obscurity is the very play of existence which would play even if there were nothing. It's precisely to introduce this paradoxical situation that we introduce the term '*there is*'."²²

The "paradoxical" situation is not, then, dialectical: the presence of absence is not a back-and-forth between absence and presence (the play is not Freud's *fort-da*)²³, and the negation does not truly negate itself to issue in a affirmation. Yet, while logically absurd, the situation cannot simply be

dismissed as self-contradictory, and so impossible, for *tertium non datur* is a later notion. "Presence of absence, *there is* is above contradiction: it embraces and dominates its contradictory. In this sense, being has no exits . . ." ²⁴

III

In an illuminating passage, Levinas attempts to locate the *there is* spatially, to describe as it were the topography of the elemental:

"The elemental has no forms containing it; it is content without form. Or rather it has but one side: the medium (*milieu*) upon which this side (*face*) takes form is not composed of things. It unfolds in its own dimension: depth, which is inconvertible into the breadth and length in which the side of the element extends." ²⁵

The elemental is not, he specifies, a thing, not an object which would present only one side at a time but around which one could circle and for which all the successive and complementary points of view are finally worth one another, "where the reverse is equivalent to the obverse" ²⁶. Rather, there is no starting point, no finishing point – no fixed point; no point of view ²⁷. "The depth of the element prolongs it till it is lost in the earth and in the heavens. 'Nothing ends, nothing begins.'" ²⁸

Yet Levinas immediately qualifies, or retracts, this description. The unidimensional element has no side at all. The only "relation" adequate to the *there is* is that which Levinas expresses by the metaphor of bathing: one does not approach the *there is*, one is in it: ²⁹

"The relation adequate to its essence discovers it precisely as a milieu: one is steeped in it. . . . (The) adequate relation with the element is precisely bathing. The interiority of immersion is not convertible into exteriority. The pure quality of the element does not cling to a substance that would support it. To bathe in the element is to be in an inside-out world, and here the reverse is not equivalent to the observe. . . ." ³⁰

The *there is*, then, is not a thing, not an object of perception or of thought, it is not approached, not intentionally constituted and not grasped by a hand or a concept. Not a thing: rather, the background of Being from which things and I emerge and detach themselves. It is like the night – not the night when all the cows are black, but the night of insomnia when for no reason one cannot sleep; the night of vigilance, when no one and nothing, yet not nothing, menaces, or when that which menaces cannot be named because it has no name. Essential anonymity. And fear arising from the very fact

"that nothing approaches, that nothing comes, that nothing menaces: this silence, this tranquility, this nothingness of sensation constitutes a deaf indeterminate menace, absolutely. . . . In this equivocal profiles the menace of the pure and simple presence of the *there is*."³¹

Levinas' recourse to the experiences of the night and of insomnia is interesting and consequential. The insomnia of this night, and the vigilance that is not waking, watching, waiting for anything specific, express for Levinas the "irremissibility of existence", that is, the impossibility of escaping it: the impossibility of dying³² – and the fact of consciousness, which he defines as the possibility of falling asleep.

Levinas recognizes, of course, that it might seem paradoxical to characterize the *there is* by vigilance,

"as if one endowed with consciousness the pure event of existing. But one must ask if vigilance defines consciousness, if consciousness is not rather the possibility of wresting oneself away from vigilance; if the proper sense of consciousness does not consist in being a vigilance backed up to a possibility of sleep; if the fact of the I is not the power to go out from the situation of impersonal vigilance. . . . Consciousness is the power of sleeping. This leak in the fullness is like the very paradox of consciousness."³³

In the simplest terms, then, one might say that in describing consciousness as the eventual ability to sleep – or in defining consciousness as the possibility of unconsciousness – Levinas means to say that it supposes separation from the *there is*, that its advent is detachment, or emergence, from the elemental, that an aspect, at least, of consciousness (awareness, subjectivity, interiority) is its power to withdraw, in sleep, from the irremissibility of Being.

IV

In a remark which recalls Rosenzweig³⁴, Levinas invokes Shakespeare and Goethe:

"The spectacle of the silent world of facts is bewitched: every phenomenon masks, mystifies *ad infinitum*, making actuality impossible. It is the situation created by those derisive beings communicating across a labyrinth of innuendos which Shakespeare and Goethe have appear in their scenes of sorcerers where speech is antilanguage and where to respond would be to cover oneself with ridicule."³⁵

The situation to which he alludes is not precisely the *there is*, but supposes it; elsewhere, more to the point, he comments that the specters, phantoms

and witches are not merely Shakespeare's tribute to his times, or vestiges of the sources he consulted, but philosophically significant: "thy allow (one) to move constantly on that limit of Being and nothingness where Being insinuates itself into nothingness, like 'the bubbles of the earth'"³⁶ – that is, to move on the verge of the *there is*.

Levinas also refers appreciatively to Maurice Blanchot's novel, *Thomas l'Oscure*, which "opens on the description of the *there is*. The presence of absence, the night, the dissolution of the subject in the night, the horror of being, the return of being in the midst of all negative movements, the reality of irreality, are admirably said there"³⁷.

It is of interest, though perhaps unnecessary, to note that the notion of the *there is* is not comparable to the Sartrean idea of the *en-soi*: "This existence (*exister*) is not an *en-soi*, which is already at peace; it is precisely the absence of any self, a *sans-soi*."³⁸ Nor, more crucially, should the "relation" with the *there is* be confused with that expressed by the Heideggerian notion of *Geworfenheit*³⁹. This, primarily, because for Levinas the *there is* is as the primordial milieu in which (one) bathes is prior to the relation between Being and a being, because there is not yet any being recognizable or identifiable in its *particularité d'étant*, its unicity and specificity. More generally, Levinas questions Heidegger's ontological difference, which in his reading renders possible the notion of abandonment: distinction, difference, is not separation; the concept of the ontological difference does not respect the autonomy of separated beings⁴⁰.

Notes

- 1 The principal passages in which LEVINAS treats of the "*il y a*" are these: in "De l'Évasion" (in *Recherches philosophiques*, 1935–36, pp. 373–392; hereafter referred to as DE); in *De l'existence à l'existant* (Paris, Éditions de la Revue Fontaine, 1947; hereafter referred to as EE), pp. 93–105; in *Le temps et l'autre* (in *Le choix, le monde, l'existence. Cahiers du Collège Philosophique*. Paris, Artaud, 1948; hereafter referred to as TA), pp. 134–40; in *Totalité et infini: Essai sur l'extériorité* (The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1961, 1965; hereafter referred to as TI), pp. 103–5, 114–6, 165, 171, 239, and 257, *i.a.*; in "Au-delà de l'essence", (in the *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, 75 (1970)), pp. 265–6; in "Signature" (in *Difficile liberté: Essais sur le Judaïsme*. Paris, Albin Michel, 1963; hereafter referred to as S), pp. 324–5.
- 2 Cf. the form, as well as the content, of ROSENZWEIG's *Stern der Erlösung* (1930), and the three "spheres" of the "world of relation" in BUBER's *Ich und Du* (1923).
- 3 The "to be" of the *there is* is pure, impersonal verb, verb without subject or object; hypostasis, "the appearance of the substantive, . . . signifies the suspension of the anonymous *there is*, the appearance of a private domain, of a name." (EE, pp. 140–1). Thus by hypostasis, or in and through this event, a being becomes the subject of the verb to be and so assumes a certain mastery, however limited, over the fatality of Being, now its attribute.
- 4 S, pp. 324–5; LEVINAS' italics.

- 5 These methodological devices, of course, – indicative rather than descriptive phrases, the *via negativa*, and analogical suggestions immediately withdrawn, – are typical of mysticism.
 - 6 EE, p. 94.
 - 7 TI, pp. xvi–xvii; italics added. The translation is Alphonso LINGIS' (*Totality and Infinity; An Essay on Exteriority*. Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press, 1969, p. 28).
 - 8 Cf. Emmanuel LEVINAS, *Théorie de l'intuition dans la phénoménologie de Husserl* (Paris, Vrin, 1970), p. 45.
 - 9 It must be noted that this treatment of Husserlian phenomenology was already prepared in LEVINAS' dissertation, *Théorie de l'intuition . . .* (*op. cit.*): there, he expresses certain reservations about Husserl's "intellectualism" – the foundational primacy of theory, the "preponderance of consciousness", in his work. Every intentional act has a representation at its base. Even Levinas' later analysis of the spontaneity and the liberty of the theoretical consciousness in Western thought is adumbrated in this study. On this critique of Husserl's intellectualism, see pages 62, 75, 86–7, 99, 141–2, 174, 184, 188–90, 192, 203, 213, 216–7, 219, 220 fn. 2, 221, 222, and 223.
 - 10 "Levinas et la phénoménologie", in the *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, 76 (1971), pp. 448–465. In support of Mr. De Greef's interpretation, we would cite a remark of Levinas': "It is in starting from a phenomenological description of knowledge (*savoir*) and its kerygmatic conditions that our analysis has encountered relations whose node leads us to make use of an ethical terminology and ethical meaning." "Language et proximité", in *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger* (Paris, Vrin, 1967; hereafter referred to as EDE), p. 28. See also "La Proximité", *Archives de Philosophie*, 34 (1971), pp. 387–8.
 - 11 Levinas presents his own understanding of the encounter with the Other as involving an inversion of the Husserlian terms: "The constitution of the Other's body in what Husserl calls 'the primordial sphere', the transcendental 'coupling' of the object thus constituted with my own body itself experienced from within as an 'I can', the comprehension of this body of the Other as an *alter ego* – this analysis dissimulates, in each of its stages which are taken as a description of constitution, mutations of object constitution into a relation with the Other – which is as primordial as the constitution from which it is to be derived. The primordial sphere, which corresponds to what we call the same, turns to the absolutely other only on call from the Other. *Revelation* constitutes a veritable inversion in relation to *objectifying knowledge*. (TI, p. 39; LEVINAS' italics. LINGIS' omission of the phrase "par rapport à" in the last sentence changes its meaning; cf. *Totality and Infinity, op. cit.*, p. 67).
- Cf. also LEVINAS' remarks on MERLEAU-PONTY's reading of HUSSERL's fifth *Meditation*, in his Preface to Theodore F. GERAETS' excellent historical study, *Vers une nouvelle philosophie transcendente. La genèse de la philosophie de Maurice Merleau-Ponty jusqu'à la "Phénoménologie de la perception"* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1971). There, Levinas demands: "Far from presenting itself as a knowledge by sympathy, is not the *Einfühlung* of which the entire fifth *Meditation* is the phenomenological description the *non-constituted event* of substitution and proximity, and which the 'knowledge of the other' ('*connaissance d'autrui*') already presupposes?" (P. xiii; LEVINAS' italics).
- On Levinas' understanding of Husserlian phenomenology as a method, see especially "Réflexions sur la 'technique' phénoménologique", in EDE, p. 111; "La ruine de la représentation", in EDE, p. 128; S, pp. 323–4; *Théorie de l'intuition . . .*, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

- 12 *Op. cit.*, p. 464.
- 13 This is not uncritically to assimilate event and experience; the event is, as it were, in the prehistory of consciousness; in the passage cited above, Levinas speaks of "a forgotten experience". On his use of the term event, cf. TI, p. 148.
- 14 TI, p. 31. Elsewhere, Levinas insists that "... if it were necessary to reconcile the notion of the *there is* with a grand theme of classical philosophy, I would think of Heraclitus. Not of the myth of the river where one cannot bathe twice, but of its version in the Cratylus, of a river where one does not bathe even once; where the very fixity of unity, form of every existent, cannot be constituted; a river where the last element of fixity in rapport with which becoming is understood disappears." (TA, p. 137). Cf. Plato's *Cratylus*, 439c–440e, where Socrates indicates the logical difficulties to which this radical thinking-through of the Heraclitean notions of flux and impermanence lead.
- 15 EE, p. 98; LEVINAS' italics.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 99. Cf. TA, p. 131: "The primitive mentality – or at least the interpretation that Lévy-Bruhl has given of it – seemed to unsettle the foundation of our concepts because it gave the impression of bringing in the idea of a transitive existence. One had the impression that by participation the subject does not merely see the other, but that he *is* the other. Notion more important for the primitive mentality than that of the prelogical or the mystical."
- 17 EE, p. 99.
- 18 Derrida suggests, however, that one might systematically confront "the horror or the terror which Levinas opposes to Heideggerian anguish with the experience of dread (*Scheu*) of which Heidegger says, in the *Nachwort to Was ist Metaphysik*, that it 'dwells near the essential anguish'." "Violence et métaphysique; Essai sur la pensée d'Emmanuel Levinas", in the *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, 1964, 3 and 4; reprinted in *L'Écriture et la différence* (Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1967), pp. 133–4.
- 19 EE, pp. 99–100. Note, however, that Levinas' remark that for Lévy-Bruhl the "primitives" are indifferent toward death as a natural fact, is in apparent contradiction with this comment: "Death, in its absurdity, maintains an interpersonal order, in which it tends to take on a meaning – as in the primitive mentality where, according to Lévy-Bruhl, it is never natural, but requires a magical explanation." (TI, p. 210).
- 20 EE, p. 103; cf. DE, p. 389.
- 21 *Ibid.*
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 104.
- 23 *Jenseits des Lustprinzips* (1920); cf. Jacques LACAN, "Fonction et champ de la parole et du langage en psychanalyse" (1953), in *Écrits* (Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1966), p. 319.
- 24 EE, p. 105. Cf. Maurice MERLEAU-PONTY, "Interrogation et dialectique", in *Le Visible et l'invisible* (Paris, Gallimard, 1964).
- 25 TI, p. 104.
- 26 *Ibid.*
- 27 See EE, p. 96: "It's a swarming of points".
- 28 TI, p. 105.
- 29 But note that this relation is metaphorical: "one" is not yet, in the *there is*, a separated being who can enter into relation.
- 30 *Ibid.*
- 31 EE, p. 96.
- 32 We cannot here examine in any depth Levinas' subtle analysis of death. Suffice it to make these points: (1) Levinas insists upon the return of Being in nothingness,

the self-affirmation of Being even in its negation: "Existence (*exister*) which returns no matter what the negation by which one sets it aside. It's like the irremissibility of pure existence." (TA, p. 135). Thus death, understood as annihilation (*néantisation*), is impossible. (2) Levinas rejects Heidegger's analyses of anguish and of being-for-death: "Anguish, according to Heidegger, is the experience of nothingness. Isn't it, on the contrary, – if by death one understands nothingness – the fact that it's impossible to die?" (TA, p. 139). Perhaps, however, the principle reason for which Levinas refuses Heidegger's analysis is that for the latter being-for-death in authentic existence is "a supreme lucidity, and thereby a supreme virility"; death is, for him, an "event of liberty." (TA, p. 165). For Levinas, however, the relation with death, impossible relation with that which is always future, is also a relation with the radically unknown, with mystery – and is thus an experience of pure passivity (TA, p. 164). Note, too, that Levinas' thought is oriented toward being-for-beyond-death; cf. his analyses of paternity and filiality in TI. (3) On Levinas' remark that "suicide is a contradictory concept" (TA, p. 169), cf. Maurice BLANCHOT, *L'Espace littéraire* (Paris, Gallimard, 1955), esp. Ch. IV.

On the link between the alterity of death and the alterity of the Other, see Jan DE GREEF, "Le Concept de pouvoir éthique chez Levinas", *Revue Philosophique de Louvain*, 68 (1970).

- 33 TA, p. 139. The last sentence reads: "Cette fuite dans le plein est comme le paradoxe même de la conscience."
- 34 Cf. *The Star of Redemption* (tr. by Wm. W. Hallo. Boston, Beacon Press, 1972), p. 26 and p. 87, where Rosenzweig refers in a similar vein to "the gray realm of the Mothers" in Goethe.
- 35 TI, p. 64.
- 36 EE, p. 101. Levinas returns to Shakespeare – specifically, to *Hamlet* – in his analysis of death here and in TA, where he asserts that "it sometime seems to me that all philosophy is only a meditation of Shakespeare." (P. 167). The remark is interesting for its implicit refusal of the popular notion that all philosophy is a meditation of (or a footnote to) Plato. Or Hegel.
- 37 TA, p. 103, fn. 1. The question of Levinas' relation to Blanchot is more complex than Derrida allows (cf. "Violence et métaphysique", *op. cit.*, p. 152). See Françoise COLLIN, *Maurice Blanchot et la question de l'écriture* (Paris, Gallimard, 1971).
- 38 TA, pp. 136–7.
- 39 But cf. DERRIDA: "it would be necessary to confront systematically this theme of the 'there is' with the allusions which Heideggers makes to the 'es gibt'." (*Loc. cit.*, p. 133).
- 40 On the questions of the ontological difference and abandonment, see especially TA, p. 132 ss.

THE ELEMENTAL IMPERATIVE

Alphonso Lingis

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For Kant, an imperative weighs on the understanding. Understanding is understanding according to principles. Understanding is under an imperative to synthesize disparate data according to the universal and the necessary. As soon as there is understanding, understanding understands that it is under an imperative that there be law. It is in subjection to the imperative for law that understanding understands. Understanding is constituted in obedience.

Understanding would not be bound by a principle it itself formulated in a representation it put before itself. The imperative weighs on the understanding before it is formulated. It is a fact; it is the first fact, for facts can be represented as facts only by an understanding that apprehends them in universal and necessary forms of judgment. The imperative is the a priori fact that precedes and makes possible the a priori forms with which understanding understands empirical facts.

The understanding is before the imperative for law as receptive to it, afflicted by it. There is a sensitivity for the imperative for law in its spontaneous activity of formulating representations of principle. This receptivity, this intellectual feeling, Kant identifies as the sentiment of respect. Respect is respect for law; respect for persons is respect for the imperative for law they diagram. Respect is phenomenologically described by Kant as "something like fear, something like inclination." Respect is the feeling of being burdened by the force of an absolute exteriority, which the spontaneity of one's representational faculty acknowledges each time it turns to immanent sense-data and takes them to represent for itself objects in a space and time that are exterior relative to itself.

The imperative is put singularly on *me*. Understanding is particularized as *my* understanding in requiring content from my sensory faculty which collects each time particular data and from my practical faculties which adjust to an each time particular layout of the phenomenal field. It is through my

practical faculties, of motion and manipulation, that the data are gathered; it is also through my practical faculties that the material of the environment is ordered according to intentions issuing from my understanding. The imperative orders the understanding to order the sensory and practical powers that particularize understanding as mine. The imperative commands my rational faculty to be in command.

The I that understands is constituted in this obedience; the subject is constituted in subjection. Ordering the activity of its sensory-motor faculties by a representation put to its will, a representation one's own reason has formulated, the human composite will make itself no longer a congeries of faculties diversely activated from without—by the transmission of forces and the lures of external nature, by the compulsions of its unconscious nature.

A will that is activated by sensuous representations is activated by the lures of pleasure that each time contingent contours of sensuous objects present. The core vital force is confirmed by a gratification offered any of its organs and receptor surfaces. The vital force in us wills to maintain itself, but does not will to will unconditionally. If the contingent lures of pleasure the empirical field offers it are not as great as the pains they inflict upon it, it can will to suppress itself; it can will its suicide. But the will that is activated by representations put to it by its own understanding subject to the imperative for the universal and necessary is motivated to will and to act in all circumstances and always. It maintains itself in force unconditionally. The rational agency constitutes itself as a will that wills itself, an identity that maintains itself in presence, an ideal presence.

The immediate effect of the rational activation of the will is the reduction of impulses and sensuous appetites to suffering. Their activation by the contingent lures of pleasure with which the sensuous faculty represents its synoptic objects is intercepted and held in suspense. Pain is engendered in the psychic apparatus; it is the mode in which the sensibility knows itself backed up to itself, mired in itself. Expiration, in the guise of the sensuous natural activity being reduced to passivity, is the modality in which the psychic apparatus knows its receptivity for the imperative for the universal and the necessary. The death the law commands is the inward knowledge understanding has of its own obedience.

But one also needs an external knowledge. In order to obey the imperative, in order to make myself in my particular empirical situation an exemplar of law, I need an advance representation of the figure I must compose of my powers. I need a representation that is concrete and sensible: an image, but also general, such that it can be transferred to other concrete material. The free imagination finds itself, from the first, commanded to produce an *imperative image*. Kant has labeled these imperative images "types."

There are three possible "types." Nature, an instrumental complex, and civil society are the three possible representations of systems ordered by law

the understanding subject to the imperative must produce. The individual's practical imagination must produce an advance representation of himself by transferring these models upon himself. The conception of law is not the same in the three images; all three types are required.

What has a nature of its own in the empirical world is a multiplicity of elements governed by an intrinsic order; the whole of the phenomenal field is represented by the theoretical employment of reason as nature inasmuch as it is understood as governed by universal laws, the laws formulated in empirical science. The individual human composite comprises a multiplicity of impulses and sensuous appetites which are excited by the representations its sensuous faculty makes of phenomenal objects as lures of pleasure. There is no necessary connection between the properties of an object and the pleasure it gives; the impulses and sensuous appetites attach the practical will each time to the particular and the contingent. When these impulses and sensuous appetites are intercepted, by a representation of the universal and the necessary conceived by the understanding and put to the practical will in their stead, the anarchic intermittence of impulses and appetites, activated by external contingencies, are made into a nature.

The second "type" is an instrumental field. The phenomenal field is represented instrumentally when its elements are represented economically: an instrument is a value, its properties and its place and time are represented as exchangeable for other terms. The end is a good for which values are exchanged. An end that is not exchangeable in turn Kant terms a *dignity*. Thus, in the economy of production, raw materials are exchanged for manufactured goods, base metals for noble metals, commodities exchanged for the production of a monument in which the idol is enshrined; henceforth the economic community will expend its resources to defend the dignity of its monuments and its idols. The imperative that requires the rational will to maintain itself in force in all circumstances and always makes of it an inexchangeable good; it requires the subject to imagine his own sensuous faculties and their objects as means. His operations in the phenomenal field will transform sensuous objects from lures for his appetites into means.

The third "type" is civil society. A multiplicity of individuals forms a civil society when they set up a legislative instance for themselves. Then those individuals are regulated neither by the armed forces of another civil society nor by the contingencies of the natural environment and the drives of their own psychophysical natures. However, the civil societies that we can perceive in empirical history have been in fact shaped by men dominated by a passion for power, for wealth, and for prestige; their order is in fact a provisional armistice between passionate men. Kant defined passion as a drive that takes a partial satisfaction of the drives in the human composite for the totality, that is, for happiness. One must rather then imagine another civil society, such that the order is rather that of what is intrinsically universal and necessary. Such would be a multiplicity of individuals regulated by

principles valid for each and in all circumstances. Each one makes himself a member of such an imaginary civil society when he represents its laws as his own. The most integrated form of civil society is a republic, where each envisages every other individual as a fellow citizen, that is, as an exemplar of laws that bind him also.

The image of such a civil society makes possible the image of each citizen and of oneself as a society unto himself. The individual will imagine his rational faculty as an autonomous legislative instance which imposes an intrinsic order upon the anarchic multiplicity of his own impulses and sensuous appetites and constitutes him as a micro-republic that makes itself independent of the orders put on him by the forces of external nature and of the anarchic compulsions of his own composite constitution.

The imperative image makes possible respect for the other. Respect for the other, as an entity on his own, a nature that is not simply to be ordered as a means for one's own ends, is respect for the law that rules in his composite faculties. To respect the other is to respect the law that commands in him and commands me also.

One does not know, in any given case, that the positions and movements one sees in the psychophysical functioning of another are in fact caused by a representation of principle he himself puts to his will, just as one does not know, in any given case, that the operation one perceives one's own faculties performing was not rather programmed in unconscious drives and regulated by the confluence of external forces. But one believes—one must believe—that it is possible that the representation of principle alone activates the will. One believes, one is commanded by the imperative laid on one's understanding to believe, that one can command one's psychophysical composite to execute actions that will be instances of the universal and the necessary. And one believes, one must believe, that the particular diagrams of action one perceives in the other's phenomenal figure can be understood as instantiations of the universal and the necessary, and that the other has in fact so represented them in advance.

The belief is immediate. It does not, like a rational hypothesis, arise in the measure that reliable observation of the stands and moves of the other in the empirical field makes plausible that other laws than those of the physical universe and those of psychophysiological natures are needed to understand them. As in the case of understanding my own nervous circuitry and energized musculature, as in the case of the irregular orbit of a comet, I am obligated to suppose that any phenomenal datum that is not an illusion holds together with the laws that make it an integral moment of nature. If the other can present the phenomenal form of a citizen, whose moves are programmed by principles represented in his own understanding, this figure is engendered, not at some advanced stage of synthetic observation of his psychophysical organs operating in intelligible nature, but out of an immediate sense of law in him, a law sensed as binding the understanding because I sense it

weighing immediately on my own understanding. In the respect for another I recognize that the exteriority of the imperative unconvertible into a principle my own understanding would formulate is the very *exteriority that constitutes alterity*. For the other is other, another nature, not by virtue of the sum total of phenomenal differences his psychophysical organism shows from my own; he is other as an authority to which I find myself subjected. That is why it is that the feeling of being contested, being summoned is immediate, comes with the first intuition of being approached by another, and why it is that one is relieved, acquitted, when one begins to see the color and shape of what is there. In the measure that one sees what it was that moved him (the discomfort of the chair, the raw wind), in the measure that one understands why he spoke as he did (the surprise of finding me here, his immigrant's faulty command of the idiom the situation calls for), in the measure that one understands why he felt as he did (how my shape fits into his archetypes of authority figures, father figures, rebel figures), one dissipates the sense that his law binds me; one's perception and synthetic understanding of what one perceives justify oneself.

The feeling of the force of the imperative in oneself, origin of the rational faculty, is itself a rational feeling; it motivates itself. It is confirmed, not by the perception of the causality with which it activates the practical will and the nervous circuitry and musculature of one's body, but rather by the feeling of one's own impulses and sensuous appetites being intercepted and blocked. This nonaccomplishment is inwardly felt as pain, not the pain with which the sentient substance knows the wound with which the outside breaks into it, but the suffering a continued appetite undergoes when the mental apparatus has itself prohibited its satisfaction. It is also this sense of pain that makes rational the a priori belief that the other is other with the alterity of an imperative. This imperative is located in the phenomenal field in which the other figures in the measure that one perceives not simply a psychophysical organism responding to the pressures and lures of its empirical environment, but rather a nature jarred and buffeted by the forces of the environment, suffering the dictates of an imperative that does not reign immemorially in physical nature. One does not perceive the efficacy of an inner program regulating his organs and his limbs; one winces, one senses the pain. One does not perceive the pain where it is, in the psychic depth in which his own nervous circuitry knows itself; one senses it at the surfaces of contact. The other, then, in his alterity, the other as a fellow citizen in the republic of ends, appears in the real world in the phenomenal figure of a surface of exposure, of vulnerability, of susceptibility, that suffers. In this suffering alterity is exposed to me and commands imperatively.

The pain of the other that afflicts me immediately, with the very immediacy with which law is a priori laid on my mental apparatus, is suffered, according to Kant's precise formulation, in the spontaneity of my understanding. Understanding arises out of, constitutes itself in, this affliction. It acts to

synthetically reorganize the sensuous substances about me into effective means for the imperative order presented in the alterity of the other. The pain of the other is the origin of my own reason.

The figure of the other as a rational agent on his own is wholly this susceptibility, this surface phenomenon. The discordance between the other as a psychophysical organism, which the imperative laid on my understanding demands I understand as wholly subject to the laws of nature, and the other as a rational agent, whose imperatives bind me, is not brutally that of the other perceived and understood and the other as the term of belief synthetically represented by my own imagination. It is rather a discordance between what we can call, on the one hand, a depth perception of the other, a perception of his phenomenal figure that prolongs itself by an understanding of the psychophysical processes that expose him to me as a phenomenal surface and which processes are determined by the electromagnetic, physico-chemical processes of a universe whose close-up phenomenal contours lure his impulses and sensuous appetites in accordance with the this time psychophysical natural laws, and, on the other hand, an affective sense of the surface of painful susceptibility which the axes of his active body expose. The pain of the other is not simply his *de facto* vulnerability as a physical substance whose space has to exclude and resist the force of inertia of other physical substances. It is a pain produced by his own action in obedience to law, an action that constitutes sensuous substances as means, such that his impulses and appetites no longer end in them.

In Kant's typology, the third type, the other as citizen in a republic of ends, is not independently elaborated alongside of the other types; it is the integral type in which moral understanding is finally accomplished. For by itself the first type, nature as a totality governed by laws, would only induce in one the Stoic or technological project of viewing one's own psychophysical complex of impulses and appetites and practical volitions as governed by universal psychophysical determinisms and induce one to take one's belief that one's practical will is activated by representations of things as lures of pleasures and risks of pain, representations produced by one's sensory faculty, to be an illusion. The first type would exclude the second, the environment as a field of means for ends that could be introduced into it. It is the third type, which presents the other's and one's own sensory surfaces as exposing themselves in a suffering that a practical will activated by the representation of the universal and the necessary engenders, that reverses the natural finality of those impulses and appetites and first makes possible the constitution of sensuous objects as means. And makes possible, thus, the second type, the image of nature as a practical field and the image of one's own faculties as means for one's own dignity.

It is at this point that we see that Kant's opening metaphysical position is overcome by his own phenomenology. Kant's practical philosophy set out

to locate the law not in nature—whether represented, as by the ancients, as a spectacle moved by a cosmic Fate or represented, as by the moderns, as an atomic or electromagnetic universe governed by the laws formulated in the natural sciences—nor in a representation of a heteronomous divine legislator of man and nature. It is in the constitution of the individual's own faculty of understanding that the imperative for law is first manifest, as an *a priori* fact. The laws formulated in the natural sciences, as well as the laws formulated by institutions in human history and society, are formulated, Kant means to show, by reason in obedience to the imperative for law it knows within itself. The force of the imperative for law is not revealed in nature or civil society, but illustrated in them.

My reason obeys the imperative by formulating principles for my will. The principles it will produce do not represent the force or the fact of the imperative, which as imperative is irrecuperably exterior. The formulation will only represent law *as though* one had given it to oneself. The imperative commands reason to constitute representations of law-governed totalities—nature, instrumental fields, civil society. The imagination will then use these images as “types,” to shape advance representations of the forms to be given one's own multiple faculties in order to make of oneself an exemplar of law.

Yet for Kant the understanding itself does not simply feel the force and the fact of the imperative; it knows its properties: the imperative is an imperative for law, for the universal and the necessary. Where has this definition come from? In fact Kant's text has drawn it from logic; this is the logical definition of a principle. From what logic? From the logic governing the pure, theoretical use of reason. But this logic, we are more clear about now than in Kant's day, is a formalization of the procedures used by speculative reason, that is, reason at work forming a synthetic representation of the empirical field as nature. Reason—that is, modern Western calculative reason. Kantism would not consider the ancient concepts of law in nature as *Dikè*, as karma, the forms of organization Lévi-Strauss has formalized as common to the great civilizations of America, or contemporary statistical concepts of law in use in recent micro- and macrophysics to have achieved the intelligibility the understanding requires. Kant's definition of law is taken directly from the formal logic elaborated out of the ancient substantive physics and metaphysics of Aristotle.

We are then forced to conclude that the formal properties of the imperative, universality and necessity, are not known *a priori*; they are derived from the “type,” from the representation of empirical nature the speculative use of reason, commanded by the force of the imperative, constitutes. But there are three types, and it is not true that the order that is found in a representation of an instrumental field or the order that is found in civil society is that of logical principles, with the properties of formal universality and necessity. It is also not true that the order that represents the phenomenal field as nature, totally representable, is only the kind of universal and necessary

laws formal logic derives from the substantive physics of Aristotle and the physics of Newton. The types, imperatively imagined, and not the sentiment of respect, are then the original locus of the form of order the imperative commands.

What then of the force and the fact of the imperative? The imperative is imperative in being absolutely exterior to the understanding on which it is laid, by not being convertible into a principle reason spontaneously formulates. In our discussion of the integral type, that of the other as fellow citizen in a republic of ends, we argued that the other is other with the very exteriority of an imperative, that his surfaces afflict one immediately, prior to the perception and the understanding that place them back into the depth of nature, with the force of an imperative. We argued that the surface of the other, a surface of affliction, immediately sensed in my own mortification, weighs on my understanding with the obsessive force of a command to neutralize my sensory faculties which represent external objects as lures of pleasure. We argued for a surface-phenomenology which explicates in the affliction with which the other surfaces before me the force of the imperative that binds all understanding, as well as the form with which it commands me.

The nature that Kant takes as the first type, the scientific representation of nature, is a nature elaborated by a depth-phenomenology. In describing the givens of external sense as pure medley, Kant anticipates the later physics that disintegrates the landscapes of vision, touch, smell, and hearing into "merely the hurrying of material, endlessly, meaninglessly" (White-head, *Science and the Modern World*, 54), place-time loci of an electromagnetic field. They function, logically, as data, that is, media in which principles are instantiated. Kant neglects completely the contours they exhibit, the hills and the valleys of landscapes, the surfaces. For him the surface of a box reduces to the side of a cube, which for its part is given not sensorially but in the geometrical formula. Our thesis is that a surface-phenomenology of nature will reveal the surfaces of exterior nature as also an original locus of the force of an imperative. The form of order such a representation of nature exhibits will reveal the form and properties of that imperative that can thus function as a "type" for the practical judgment imperatively enjoined upon us.

The essential themes of a surface phenomenology of nature were elaborated two centuries after Kant in the work of Merleau-Ponty. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology showed, beneath or prior to nature as objectively represented by theoretical or scientific nature, not a pure sensuous medley, but sensible things. The relationship between the sensible aspects in a thing is not that of external relations or additive juxtaposition, and the sensible aspects do not simply, as in the Kantian conception, instantiate in a here and now basic forms of organization that can be disengaged from the logic of predication.

A sensible thing has the consistency and coherence of a *Gestalt*, where the parts both implicate and express one another. The visible pattern determined by and determining the tangible surface and composition, the sonority, and the odor presents a "sensible essence" to perception from the start.

Secondly, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology elaborated a quite new conception of the field in which things are set and extended. He does not, like Kant, see it as infinite axes of space and time actually given in intuition. But for him it is also not composed of horizons in Husserl's sense—series of potential objects intuited with a multitude of concomitant rays of intentionality spreading about the central ray that fixes the actualized object. He also does not conceive it as Heidegger does—as a dynamic array of instrumental links. Merleau-Ponty centered on the phenomenon of levels. The eye distinguishes the colors as they distend or contrast with the level of the ambient color-tone and with the level of the light. The ear delineates particular sound patterns, of a particular pitch and intensity, as they diverge from the key in a melody, from the general murmur of nature, from the rumble of the city. The touch discriminates particular tactile patterns by taking a certain pressure and density of the tangible as a level—the fingers pick out the Braille letters from the texture of the paper. Sensible things are set on levels; the background is neither indeterminate nor a multitude of potential figures; it is a nexus of sensible levels. The levels are not intuited with a pure or a priori intuition, nor are they constituted or posited by an organizing intellectual operation. They are not really perceived; one does not look at the light, one looks with it or according to it. The real world is the matrix of sensible levels. The world is on the side of the carnal subject; it is that with which we perceive.

Sensible things are not really given in perception but command it like norms. Our perception, Merleau-Ponty finds, in fact discriminates the real colors and sonorous resonance and weight and sizes and shapes of things from colors and tones and sizes and shapes refracted through a medium or seen in abnormal light or set askew or seen in perspective or from a distance because it is finalized toward seeing things, that is, intersensorially coherent and consistent wholes. Our perception takes as phantoms, mere appearances, mirages, illusions, sensory patterns that do not fit in with the consistency and coherence of things. The imperative to perceive things is itself grounded in the imperative to perceive a world. Things have to not exhibit all their sides and qualities, have to compress them behind the faces they turn to us, have to tilt back their sides in depth, and not occupy all the field with their relative bigness, because they have to coexist in a field with one another, and that field has to coexist with the fields of other possible things.

In Merleau-Ponty the world is as an imperative. It is not given; the light illuminates things in the measure that one does not see it but sees according to it and with it. The levels make the things that emerge as reliefs set on

them compossible, but the world they form, the cosmos, the order, the consistency and the coherence, is not representable as a set of universal and necessary laws. It is recognized as a style (the style by which we recognize Paris again, the style of being by which we recognize the visible, the tangible, the sonorous), and, like every style, the style of reality is recognized in transition, in the transition from one thing to another and in the transition from one field of things to another.

In Kant the categorical imperative requires the theoretical employment of reason which is obligated to construct a representation of one's field of experience as a universally necessary nature in movement, and, paradoxically, this theoretical employment of reason represents nature in such a way as to make the practical employment of reason, to produce rational and free initiatives, unintelligible. Practical reason has to juxtapose to the first imperative image, nature as represented by the theoretical employment of reason, a second imperative image, the environment as a field of means and ends. There is a parallel aporia in Merleau-Ponty. The objective representation of the universe elaborated by empirical science makes objects out of sensible things by realizing in advance in an object all the aspects that the successive and perspectival exploration of a thing will make determinate. It will have to represent the perceiver's own body as a totally determinate object, in determinate relations with the movements of objects outside that body, and it will have to represent the perceiver's perceptual field itself as a multiplicity of psychic facts, sensations, in a constant relationship with the objective properties of external stimuli. Merleau-Ponty affirms that this objectification of things, of the levels, of the perceiving body, and of the appearances of things in the perceptual field about that body is indeed commanded by the world-imperative itself; it accomplishes the most complete commitment to the imperative that one perceive with and according to the levels, with a perceiving finalized toward the consistent and coherent things they put forth.

But this unreserved commitment to the world-imperative produces, paradoxically, a disengagement from the world. The subject that has converted the world of levels with which he perceives into a representation of fully determinate objects whose futures are present and whose perceptual possibilities are actualized and has converted his perception of himself through postural schema and body image into a representation of a psychophysical object and has converted the sensible field of his perception into a layer of psychic impressions locates himself everywhere and nowhere, converts himself into a high-altitude universal eye contemplating a psychophysical object he no longer moves with and whose initiatives are in fact physically determined reactions.

Yet Merleau-Ponty also sees in the science of our day—what Kant did not see in the science of his—the objectification of the universe pivoting on itself and, at a certain point in its elaboration, returning to the sensible

world. Psychology discovers, by its own methods, the unverifiability of the hypothesis of constancy between physiological impulses and the *Gestalten* that form in the subject's field of perception. Physiology discovers, by its own methods, that the behavior of a living organism is correlative not with the objective properties of the external objects impinging upon it but with their phenomenal properties, discovers that it must, to understand behavior, correlate it not with the stimuli as represented by physics and chemistry but with the sensory appearance of the organism's environment, which the organism itself elaborates with its specific sensorium. Eventually physics too discovers as ultimate physical facts relational events which implicate the observer in the observed. The scientist devoted to objectifying representation finds himself returning to a world of sensible levels in order to understand how he is commanded to pursue objectification, what operations his thought effects on the things given in his phenomenal field, and how he occupies a viewpoint, stands, moves, and sees.

The movement of disengagement from and return to the sensible field and levels of the world, which Merleau-Ponty maps out in the advance of objectifying thought, he already finds in perception. "The relation between the things and my body is decidedly singular; it is what makes me sometimes remain in appearances, and it is also what sometimes brings me to the things themselves; it is what produces the buzzing of appearances, it is also what silences them and casts me fully into the world. Everything comes to pass as though my power to reach the world and my power to entrench myself in phantasms only came one with the other; even more: as though the access to the world were but the other face of a withdrawal and this retreat to the margin of the world a servitude and another expression of my natural power to enter into it" (*The Visible and the Invisible*, 8). The body that advances to and retreats from the levels at which things are found is the competent body, which can have objectives because the future and the possibilities of things are open-ended and because the imperative that makes each thing an objective is relativized by the next thing and because the levels do not hold him unless he takes hold of them. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology makes perception a *praktognosis*, makes our existence a stance whose posture is directed upon objectives, makes our body occupied and laborious. Is then *Homo faber* the schematic style of which every culturally elaborated figure of corporeality is a variant? Merleau-Ponty set out to show at least that the scientific culture which represents the psychophysical organism as an integrally determined object among integrally determined objects does not produce a new figure of corporeality in which we can actualize ourselves. It is itself motivated by the imperative world-levels which present things as objectives for competent bodies.

What of the disengagement from things, and from the levels and planes which engender things, toward those refuges from the space of the world where the phantom doubles of monocular vision, perceptual illusions, mere

appearances, refract off the surfaces of things; what of the dream-scene, the private theaters of delirious apparitions, that realm of death in which the melancholic takes up his abode? What of the possibility of releasing one's hold on the levels, drifting into a sensible apeiron without levels, into that nocturnal, oneiric, erotic, mythogenic second space which shows through the interstices of the daylight world of praktognostic competence? Might not the body that lets go of things and retreats from the planes and axes of the world be ordered by another imperative—an elemental imperative?

Emmanuel Levinas has separated the elemental from the world-order by reinstating the separation of sensing from perception. The ground, reservoir of support, the light, the luminous clearing, the silence or the incessant murmur of the city, the heat and the damp of the monsoon, the night in which all the contours of the things are engulfed and which is not nothingness but darkness—these surfaceless phenomena, without contours, inobservable from different viewpoints, without boundaries, but also without horizons, are not simply conditions for the possibility of things, as Husserl defined the field, nor simply the dimensions in which objects are extended, like the infinite space-time dimensions of Kantian pure sensibility, nor are they levels generating things. One comes upon things in light, distributed over the supporting earth; one hears a sound in the silence; one takes hold of a tool in the dark, moves it in the light. But what get apprehended as things also revert to the elemental. As a tool a hammer is a surface of resistance and an axis of force determinate in its involvement with other surfaces, implements and obstacles. But the tool, in being used, reverts to a rhythm in the vigor of the carpenter bathed in the morning sun. The house is a tool-chest, in which implements are arranged in the order most suitable to the specific uses of the inhabitant, a machine for living, as Le Corbusier said, but in being inhabited, it and all its contents sink into the elemental density of a zone of intimacy and retreat from the open roads of the world.

The elemental is sensed in a movement *sur place* that has to be phenomenologically distinguished from the intentional finality of perception. The movement in sensation that senses the elemental is not the intentional transcendence that passes from the surface to the thing, from the *sense-datum*, in the non-empiricist sense of a *given directive*, to its referent, from a signifier to the signified, in obedience to a world that, as a complex of signification, orders one's moves; the sensuous sensation is rather a movement of involution, which ends with the given, which envisages no future and no possibility, which ends in light, earth, silence. The involution, not an initiative but an affectivity, a conformity with what supports and sustains, with the sensuous medium, Levinas identifies as enjoyment. For Levinas the intentionally directed relationship with light, the musical key or the rumble of the world as levels, axes, dimensions, is itself a structure that arises out of elemental enjoyment and relapses back into it.

The imperative that comes and that speaks and that orders, Levinas argues, comes from beyond the elemental sphere of enjoyment and beyond the praktognostic field of perception, comes from the alterity that phenomenally is traced in the face of another. The imperative for the perception of things and the world, he argues, arises from the encounter with the face of another; the things are things by being offerable to another; the substances presented are representable as things in the language—of words but also of gestures and works—that makes their objectivity intersubjectively verifiable; the world is the clearing staked out by others beyond the zone of intimacy of one's own sensory enjoyment and inhabitation.

Totality and Infinity is commanded by the exigency to preserve the imperative status of alterity by making alterity irreversible; Levinas argued against a position such as Hegel's, which finds a totality in the rational organization of the kingdom of ends, a totality produced when the one that is subjected by the heteronomous order dialectically arises to subject the one that orders in turn, finally objectifies the totality before the ultimate, self-constituting consciousness of the one to whom the totality is given, and who, for his part, is free from every imperative he has not given himself. The withdrawal from the totality Levinas locates at the beginning, when the subject constitutes its as-for-me in the closed sphere of contentment. Then the imperative falls upon that closed contentment as an a posteriori event from the exteriority of alterity.

But *Otherwise than Being* elaborates a very new conception of the sensibility that opens upon the pure elements—upon light, earth, sonority, warmth, tranquility, liquidity, heat. Levinas's earlier work had separated the sensibility for the sensuous elements, in which the subject constitutes itself as an eddy of enjoyment; an involution of contentment, and the sensibility for the contestation and order laid on one by the face of alterity, and which is laid on a subject already constituted for-itself. This second sensibility is received in the initiatives of responsibility, in action; and action will be action on things in the pathways of the world—not, as in Kant, simply an ordering of the sensuous substances, whose contours are immediately represented as lures of pleasure, into means in a universal practical field for which the apathetic rational agent is the end or, rather, for which the community of republican legislators, whose legislation promulgates the universal laws of nature, is the end. Levinas conceives the world practically constituted in obedience to the imperative to be not a universe of objects, but a world of things, of sensuous substances ordered to the needs and demands of the other. *Otherwise than Being* will find that the separation of the two receptivities, so emphatically argued in *Totality and Infinity*, the receptivity for the sensuous elemental and the receptivity for the imperative which comes a posteriori from alterity, cannot be maintained. The imperative that contests and that commands one's sensuous enjoyment also commands it from the start. It is precisely as a subject that enjoys the elemental that one

is ordered. The very involution into the elemental with which an eddy of subjectivity first stirs in the night of the there-is is commanded.

Levinas maintains the desacralized and positive Enlightenment conception of preobjective nature. His late writings aggravate in a new way the separation of the there-is of the gratuitously, contingently given elemental and the exteriority of the imperative. From the period of his incarceration in a Nazi concentration camp, Levinas could conceive the imperative neither in the nourishing and sustaining substance of preobjective elemental nature nor, like Hegel, in the judgment formulated by the course of events in the history of the world, but rather only as a transcendent instance that judges the hunger and destitution which nature inflicts on human life, and judges with the tears, the blood, the corpses of Auschwitz and Hiroshima the course of world-history. Like Kant's final pages, where Kant hypostatized in the figure of God, Lord of nature and Lord of the kingdom of ends, the locus of the imperative that orders the one to the other, Levinas invokes the non-concept of God to preserve the absolute alterity of the imperative that is phenomenally *traced* in the perceptible face of another. As in Kant, the manifestation of the imperative is finally located in the order formulated in the understanding itself *as though* it were a law one gives to oneself; for Levinas the first utterance of one's own speech bears witness within itself to the imperative facticity and force of God. For Kant, every law formulated by the synthetic activity of the faculty of reason always *appears* as a law one gives to oneself, but it owes all its imperative force to the fact that it is put forth as a response to an order that is obeyed before being formulated. So, in Levinas, the first words of speech, the words with which I first arise as a subject of logos, are the words: Here I am! Here I am, at your service! This Yes with which I begin to speak is set forth as my own self-affirmation, but it is a response to a summons to speak that came from without. When I turn to face the one that called upon me, I find only the sensible face of another molded out of light and shadow. But the implied "at your service!" in the "Here I am" bears witness to that of which this light and shadow are but the trace, and which is the transcendence of an imperative that orders unconditionally before being formulated. To this unformulable one assigns the pseudoformula, the pseudonym, of the word God.

This solution, it seems to us, leaves not only phenomenologically unexplicated but unexplicable the relationship between the sensibility for the elemental and the sensibility for alterity. One will answer: precisely Levinas understands the response to alterity as a contestation of the contentment in which one enjoys the elemental. But this leads us to criticize, as metaphysical, the concepts of pleasure and enjoyment and contentment with which Levinas has understood the sensibility that is prior to the perception of things. Heidegger incorporated the ordination to another in the very constitution of implements; an implement is not first an entity that is, in its being, for-me,

and then, by an external relation, destined for-others; just as no tool is useful for just here and for now, but useable for a time and in several places, so it is a tool only by being objective, that is, for-anyone. So also we argue that if one is backed up into presence in the elemental in the involution of enjoyment by the demand imperatively addressed to one, then the imperative is constitutive of the very presence of the elemental; the elemental is not there as given but as an imperative.

In this respect Merleau-Ponty's analysis had gone further. Merleau-Ponty conceives of the levels on which things are given as directives. One does not see the light, as a particular objectified before one; one does not enjoy the light by a closing spiral of involution; one sees with the light. The light which clears space, which establishes a level, orders the eye. Earth is a nonobject, cannot be observed; when one circulates on its surface one does not synthetically advance toward the total series of its profiles. Its nonweight supports all weights—those of the things and that of one's standing body. One does not grasp the earth with any other *prise* than one's posture ordered to uprightness. The sonorous level, the chromatic level of the room and of the landscape, the darkness of the night, the scope of the symphony or the hubbub of the halls at intermission, the play of will-o'-the-wisps and mirages and monocular images that flicker in the interstices of the world—these world-rays are for Merleau-Ponty not phenomenally given to the movement of closure of contentment, but as levels are directives that a priori lay an order on the eye and the hand that moves and that gropes for objectives.

But Merleau-Ponty defines these imperative levels in two ways which seem to us to be contestable. On the one hand, for him, the things and the world are the finality of these sensory imperatives. The light leads us—to things, the earth holds us—within reach of things it stabilizes before us. The visible, the world, remains the telos of sensibility, assigned by the imperatives that order the spaces between things. On the other hand, for him every withdrawal from the world is a withdrawal of the sentient body into itself.

He takes the systole and diastole of presence to and withdrawal from the world as an existential movement that from the world-imperative retreats back into one's own body. As I walk my eyelids drop over my vision a brief lights-out; with each step the close-up plane of the landscape shudders before settling down again in its stability; the shudder is in fact in my body. The laboratory subject, in a room empty of tasks, is reduced to reflex movements provoked within his body. The one that awaits sleep, like the shaman awaiting the enchantment, withdraws his intentional implantation in the tasks of the world. The space in which dreams form and drift, in which the great black bird rises and falls, is a Kantian space whose crests and troughs are thrown out by the respiration and the flux of erotic craving surging and subsiding within the substance of the dreamer's body. If the dream-space is filled with nothing but the debris of the world, if in this space

the dreamer does not quit the world of perception and that is why reawakening back into the world is possible, Merleau-Ponty willfully affirms that the sensuous density with which one maintains contact even in sleep is the reservoir of things. For him the enchanted fields of the shaman, the supralapsarian ether of myths, the feverish matrix of hallucinations, and the Eden of the child are so many regions of the world, which contains all these, and which one was only wrong to identify with the scientifically verified representation of the world realized. What Merleau-Ponty denounces with the term "prejudice of the world" is this realization. We think, however, that he has not carried his critique of the prejudice of the world far enough. We think that to withdraw from the illuminated surfaces and contours is phenomenologically to give oneself over to the night, to be drawn not to the body but by an elemental imperative. Blanchot has, in a very early text, described sleep existentially not as a reflux of the existential arc that by awakening embraces the world and now turns only in the forms of one's own pure and a priori sensibility; sleep is a stance of existence, one goes to sleep, one anchors oneself firmly against the pillow and upon the great body of earth in trust, and one draws from the elemental rest of earth, prior to the stability of any object, one's own repose. We think that the sensibility that withdraws from the world is drawn not into itself, but subjected to the elemental.

We think then that the world in Merleau-Ponty's sense—the light that forms a level along which color-contrasts phosphoresce, the key about which the melody rises and falls, the murmur of nature from which a cry rises, the rumble of the city beneath which a moan of despair descends—these levels themselves form in a medium without dimensions or horizons—the luminosity more vast than any panorama that the light outlines in it; the vibrancy that prolongs itself outside the city and beyond the murmur of nature, the darkness more abysmal than the night from which the day dawns and into which it confides itself. We submit that the world itself is set in depths, in uncharted abysses, where there are vortices in which the body that lets loose its hold on the levels of the world, the dreaming, the visionary, the hallucinating, the lascivious body, gets drawn and drags with it, not things, but those appearances without anything appearing, those phantoms, caricatures, and doubles that even in the high noon of the world float and scintillate over the contours of things and the planes of the world.

But we also mean to argue that if the sensibility is drawn into these vortices beyond the nexus of levels where the world offers things, it is drawn imperatively. Does not the visionary eye that is not led to the lustrous things the light of the world illuminates obey another imperative in the light, the imperative not to make distinct but to make clear, the imperative to be a *lumen naturale*, a solar incandescence which squanders almost all of its light in the darkness without bringing any things within its reach? Is not our stand which enjoys the support of earth also subjected to its order; to support and to ground? Does not the vertigo that gives itself over to the

abyss that descends and descends without end obey, not the imperative of the depth to maintain surfaces, but another imperative that depth promotes and is: to deepen? Does not the hearing that hears, not the particular songs, cries, and noises of the world, but the vibrancy beyond the corridors of the world obey the imperative addressed to hearing that it become vibrant? Is there not in the earth, water, atmosphere, and light that life has produced on this planet the imperative that life live to become support, to become oceanic, to become aerial, spiritual, to become lambent?

Levinas separated the elemental from its imperative; the imperative backs one up into the elemental from exteriority, the exteriority traced in the alterity of the other. He situates the imperative, not in an ideal order beyond all phenomenal reality, an order accessible only to pure understanding, but in the face, the surface, with which alterity becomes a phenomenon. The imperative takes form in the eyes of another inasmuch as they open in the visible a hollow of nakedness and want, in the hands that let go of the things to turn to me empty-handed, in the disarming with which the other that advances upon me does so only with the vanishing breath of his voice, in the skin, inasmuch as it is, beneath or between the diagrams of signs the musculature of initiative trace on it, wrinkled with the passivity and vulnerability of its suffering and its mortality.

This substance of the face, this exposed vulnerability, seems to us to belong to the elemental. The face that faces does not only demand things. The eyes that speak do, it seems to us shine; in them the light dwells and radiates its directives. The body that stands before one, at the distance of alterity, that demands one take a position, answer for an attitude, that orders one, draws the repose of its position from earth, makes itself the figure in which the ground demands that one ground. In undertaking to answer responsibly, in undertaking to secure the ground for what one says and does, it is first to the imperative for ground that the stand of another addresses singularly to one that one responds.

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LEVINAS' LOGIC

Jean-François Lyotard

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The following lines of thought are part of a study that is in progress, aiming to establish that prescriptive statements are not commensurable with denotative ones — or in other words, with descriptive ones. We begin by examining the situation of Levinas' thought in the face of Hegelian persecution. This brings into the center of reflection the question of commentary and, as will be seen, the confrontation with the second Kantian *Critique*. The reader will see by the end of this essay that the implications and conclusions to which these lines of thought should lead are here treated in a very abridged or precipitate manner.

I. Commentary and persecution

To begin with, this is a discourse that sets a trap for commentary, attracting it and deceiving it. In this course lies a major stake, which is not merely speculative but political. Let us run through the stages of the seduction.

Levinas asks that the absolutely other be made welcome. The rule applies to any commentary on Levinas as well. So, we will take care not to flatten the alterity of his work. We will struggle against assimilations and accommodations. This is the least justice we can do him. Such is the first figure of commentary: the hermeneutic — discourse of good faith.

But good faith is never good enough, or the request for alterity is never satisfied. We will say to ourselves that the best way of answering it is to reinforce the difference between work and commentary. The more, as aliens to Levinas, we speak of Levinas, the more we conform to his precept — and also, the more Levinas will be bound to welcome the commentary. For example, what could be more alien to a Talmudist than a pagan? Second figure: the paradoxical — discourse of ambivalence.

The merest trifle separates it from the third figure (and this trifle means that Levinas dislikes pagans). In the third figure the commentator superadds to the alterity: since you ask for it, he says to Levinas, I will not treat you as my similar, but as my dissimilar; I can do you justice only by mistreating you. Indeed, if in your view to be just is to court alterity, then the only way to be just towards your discourse of justice is to be unjust about it. And what is more, you will have to do me justice, in accordance with your law. So if I say, like Hegel in his *Spirit of Christianity*, that the infinity of your God is the bestiality of your people, that the letter of your writing is your people's stupidity, you and your people will have to say to me: that is just.¹

Discourse of persecution. It is not even above parodying the persecuted. It will say, for example, "*Do before understanding*"²; is this not what the commentator is bound to do with this work, if he understands it? This doing, which in this case is a saying (the saying of the commentary), would not deserve its name, according to the very terms of the work under commentary, and would merely be something *said* if it did not *interrupt* what is said in the work, if it were not a word that stands in sharp contrast to it.³

What seems to authorize the parody and the persecution is the principle that justice consists in alterity. So the persecutor reasons thus: only alterity is just, the unjust is always the other of the just, and so all that is unjust is just. If the one who suffers the injustice should protest against this sophism, I will declare that he has only its major term to blame, which is none other than his own law. For if the premise states that the rule is alterity, then it necessarily authorizes retortion, enabling the same to be drawn from the other and the other from the same. If this amounts to persecution, it is the fault of the persecuted alone; he suffers only from his own law and refutes himself. Such is the mechanism of the Hegelian description; this phenomenology is ironic by means of its "I understand you."

Levinas sometimes tries a riposte against the persecuting commentary by keeping on its own ground. For instance, he attacks Hegelian alterity so as to show that it is only a caprice of identity (and that it consequently cannot be just): "The *otherwise than being* is couched in a saying which must also unsay itself so as thus to tear away the *otherwise than being* from the said, wherein the *otherwise than being* already begins to signify nothing more than a *being otherwise*."⁴ The absolutely other is not the *other of* a same, *its* other, in the heart of that supreme sameness that is being; it is *other than* being. The just does not relate dialectically to the unjust, because there is no neutral middle ground (except in insomnia) where they might be twisted around, where their mutual opposition might be synchronized.⁵ The discourse of the would-be middle ground is presumptuous.

Now this riposte is not irrefutable. And if there is a trap in Levinas' discourse, it consists first of all in tempting its reader to refute this riposte. It seems appropriate to follow the path of this seduction.

II. The enunciative clause

In order to escape my argumentation, says the persecutor, it is not enough to plead the exclusive disjunction, in a statement such as, for instance, *The entirely other is other than all that is*. All things considered, the mechanism of the refutation is simple enough. Whatever the operator used in the statement, however strongly negative it may be, to use it always "implies" an assertion in the enunciation. So we could always "infer" an affirmative expression from a negative expression; we only have to bring into play the enunciative clause. In this way, for example, we can maintain that *nonbeing is*, because we can state that *nonbeing is nonbeing*.⁶ The enunciative clause that permits this "inference" constitutes the unexpressed premise of this argumentation: *All that is said to be, or not to be, something, is*.

The "implication" in question can be declared a sophism only if it is agreed that it is forbidden to formulate the enunciative assertion in the form of an attributive statement; or in other words, only if the above-mentioned premise is rejected.

But if we are trying to escape from the aporias of positivism and mere propositional logic, it seems inevitable and even desirable to use this premise, and therefore the "sophism" seems necessary. The enunciative clause is indeed the king-pin, which seems to allow us to derive the "substance" of statements from the "subject" of the enunciation, as in the Cartesian meditation on the *Cogito*, or to include the subject in the substance, as in Hegel's phenomenological description. It can be shown that all philosophical discourses, no matter how diverse, make use of this clause, if only in a hidden manner. For the philosopher, to be forbidden this clause as formulated by logicians — by Russell, for example, in the theory of types of statements⁷ — would make it impossible to philosophize.

Now Levinas' books abound in such statements. This is obviously true of those texts that thematize the subject of pleasure, in which Levinas describes the constitution of this subject and in which it is methodologically necessary for statements relating to this subject to be proffered, or profferable, by him as well, since in the absence of this authority the theme could not be validated. Such is the "phenomenology" of the early books.⁸

We are tempted to object that this validation procedure applies only to the ego's discourse about itself; that the resulting validity of the statements merely attests simultaneously to the closure of this discourse in the identity of experience; but that, as soon as we come to the other great Levinasian theme — the transcendence of the other — we must not be able to detect the use of the enunciative clause in it. Or else, if we can manage it, if we can show that the absolutely other is so only (or is so in any case) in relation to the assertion that maintains the statement of its exteriority, then we can boast that we have ruined the essential project of the work. Such is the temptation.

On this point, let us take, somewhat at random, the following passage from *Totality and Infinity*: "The interiority assuring separation *must*", writes Levinas, "... produce a being that is absolutely closed on itself, not drawing its isolation dialectically from its opposition to the Other. And this closure *must not* forbid the exit out of interiority, in order that exteriority may speak to it, reveal itself to it, in an unpredictable movement. . . ." In this text we find two essential statements: *The self (soi) does not proceed from the other; the other befalls the self*. Let us call them respectively $\sim p$, q . Levinas tells us first that if the self proceeded from the other ($=p$), the other would have no marvels to reveal to it, and no transcendent occurrence would touch it:

1. If p , then $\sim q$.

This relation can also be expressed by the exclusive disjunction $p \vee q$.

After the second *must*, we are told two things. First (and this is in fact implied in the context of the book rather than in our passage), confirming the preceding relation and verifying the disjunction — that the miraculous transcendence of the other is conditional upon the closure of the self:

2. If $\sim p$, then q .

The second is more surprising, although more "natural"; it is that the other can befall the self only *in spite of* the latter's self-sufficiency — which would be expressed as:

3. If $\sim p$, then $\sim q$.

or: if the self does not proceed from the other, then the other does not befall the self.

We see how Levinas struggles to escape the Hegelian persecution. Far from the exterior's inverting itself into the interior and the interior into the exterior, as is said of language in the *Phenomenology of Mind*, a group of statements and relations between statements is proposed here that could hold the exteriority of the other and the interiority of the self separate. And yet this group is not greatly different from the group of expressions and relations that could be drawn from Hegel's discourse. In particular, the "lapsus" constituted by relation (3) juxtaposed with the first two relational expressions puts the Levinasian group very close to what, in Hegel, is called "contradiction" and *Aufhebung*.

The comparison may seem superficial, but it is less so than it appears. Do we think we have exhausted the connotations of the two *musts* that punctuate this passage by translating them into the form of propositional implication? They express not only the necessity that, in different ways, links those parts of statements, which p and q are: they indicate not only an alethic propositional modality (*It is necessary that . . .*), but also an epistemic propositional modality (*It is certain that . . .*), and above all a modality that is not propositional but "illocutionary" (directed towards the addressee of the message) and almost "conversational," all of which makes these *musts* into an appeal from the author to his reader with a view to obtaining

his agreement to statements (1), (2), and (3) — *failing which*, this “conversation,” which his reading is, will have to be interrupted.¹⁰ Hence, the “necessity” expressed by this *must* bears upon the pragmatic nature of Levinas’ discourse: if you, the addressee of that discourse, accept *p* (i.e., that the self proceeds from the other), then you must refuse *q* (i.e., that the other befalls the self), and you will not be on my side — you will be a Hegelian.

In “propositional” readings of the *must*, its scope is kept at the level of statements (*énoncés*). But to make a pragmatic, or “perlocutionary,” interpretation of it (i.e., one that relates to the locutory situation that defines the message’s relations of addresser/addressee), we are obliged to take into account the act of enunciation (*énonciation*). Thus the enunciative clause comes back into the statements.

And it comes back with its customary effect, which is to make the properties of the statements (in the case of our text, the disjunctive exclusion) almost negligible, in favor of the enunciative assertion. This is something one could observe in comparing the *must* of Levinas with equivalent expressions from the pen of Hegel, such as the famous “*es kommt nach meiner Einsicht . . . alles darauf an, das Wahre nicht als ‘Substanz,’ sondern ebenso sehr als ‘Subjekt’ aufzufassen und auszudruecken*,”¹¹ or the equally celebrated “*es ist von dem Absoluten zu sagen, dass es wesentlich ‘Resultat’, dass es erst am ‘Ende’ das ist, was es in Wahrheit ist*”¹² (“According to my way of seeing . . . , everything depends on this, that one apprehends and expresses the true not only as *substance*, but just as much as *subject*,” and, “It must be said of the absolute that it is essentially *result*, that only *in the end* is it what is in truth”). The *musts* contained in these statements seem to have exactly the same connotations as those we have just identified — in particular the connotation that if you, the reader, refuse to say that the absolute is result or that substance is also subject, then our interlocution, or perlocution, ceases. Besides, Hegel does not hesitate to indicate the enunciative clause very strongly with a “*Nach meiner Einsicht*,” an “I assert that . . . ,” a “constative” that is also, it seems, a “representative,” an *I wish that* . . . or an *I insist that* . . .¹³

Strictly speaking, then, we are not here dealing with mere assertion, regarded by propositional logics as the zero degree of the enunciative modality, but with more subtle enunciative modalities having perlocutionary application. The pragmatic force of statement-elements, such as these *musts*, places Levinas’ discourse in the same field as Hegel’s. Levinas says, “The interior and the exterior must be exterior”; Hegel says, “The interior and the exterior must be interior.” Propositionally, the two statements are contraries. But they have the same perlocutionary form: for the discourse of ethics to hold together, the claim for the exteriority of the interior relation is just as necessary as the claim for its interiority is for the discourse of phenomenology. In this respect the two discursive positions are not different.

They have another feature in common: both these enunciative demands, but in fact Levinas' infinitely more than Hegel's, are not formulated as such but are slipped into the statements as modalities that govern their parts (p and q), and not as enunciative acts that govern the attitudes of the protagonists of philosophical discourse. In both cases they are "speculative" statements in which the form of the statement (in our example, the *must*) implies the instance of the enunciation while hiding it.¹⁴

Now if this is so, Levinas' statements can be placed on a par with Hegel's only to the detriment of Levinas, because this would imply finally that the exteriority of the other, expressed by the statements p and q and their relations (1), (2), and (3), even when the author of *Otherwise than Being* declares it to be absolute, can obviously be so only according to the enunciative modality of the "constative-representative" *must*, that is, only relative to the enunciative clause. And consequently it is in the Hegelian discourse, which explicitly needs this clause to be inserted in order to form statements (since substance must also be subject), that the Levinasian discourse must take its place, as a moment of it.

We will thus have shown that Levinas' riposte against ontology is refutable and that the project of emancipating ethical discourse in relation to the same fails in view of the enunciative clause. And we will have thus completely succumbed to the temptation into which the Levinasian discourse leads those who have not broken with the speculative project.

Levinas himself felt this temptation and succumbed to it, as we know incidentally from the last lines of "Signature," which concludes *Difficile liberté*:

It has been possible, since *Totality and Infinity*, to present this relation with the Infinite as irreducible to "thematization" . . . Henceforth the ontological language still used in *Totality and Infinity* so as to exclude the purely psychological significance of the analyses put forward, is avoided. And the analyses, themselves, refer not to *experience*, where a subject always thematises what he is equal to, but to *transcendence*, where he answers for what his intentions have not measured.¹⁵

III. Prescriptives against denotatives

These last lines indicate to the commentator how he has been trapped: by treating Levinas' discourse as if it were speculative when it is not. The word *speculative* designates not only, as previously understood, a discourse whose statements (badly formed ones, from the logician's point of view) "imply" its enunciation by whatever aspect you like. Speculative discourse in this sense is opposed to positive *discourse*, that is, one whose conditions of validity are determined by propositional logic, in its own metalanguage. But in a more "elementary" way, the term *speculative* must be set in opposition

to other terms designating other kinds of discourse, such as those of the poet, the politician, the moralist, the pedagogue, and others. This second test leads us to place the speculative on the same side as the positive and opposed to these other genres, as discourses with a denotative function must be placed opposite those with a deontic or aesthetic function. The speculative and the positive alike are in effect kinds of discourse placed under the law of truth: we judge them both as true or false. The problem peculiar to the speculative is to determine in what subgenre of discourse one may describe the criteria of truth or falsity valid for all discourses of the denotative genre; and that is where, as we have said, the enunciative clause intervenes.

The nondenotative genres of discourse, for their part, seem reducible to two, according to Levinas: those placed under the rule of the just/unjust, such as the moral and the political, and those of the writer and the orator, which draw on an "aesthetic" value. Levinas evinces the greatest suspicion concerning the *discursive arts*, which he regularly characterizes as techniques of seduction.¹⁶ We know that his wager is on the contrary to succeed in placing the deontic genre at the heart of philosophical discourse. This implies in principle that the latter consists in describing not the rules that determine the truth or falsity of statements but those that determine their justice or injustice. Hence it seems that the "well-formed" expressions that concern Levinas do not need to be well-formed in the terms required by propositional logic. They belong to that group of statements that Aristotle, in a text often commented upon, declares he leaves to one side of the reflections of the logician.¹⁷ In their deep structure, and regardless of their surface forms, properly Levinasian statements are "imperatives." If justice becomes the unique concern of philosophical discourse, it is then in the position of having to comment not on descriptions (denotative statements) but on prescriptions.

Now to comment on a prescription poses a difficult problem. Take for example an order like *Close the door*. The commentary on this order is not an order but a description. The prescriptive statement gives place to a denotative one.

In the terms of the pragmatics of communication, the commentator is the addressee of a first-order message (here the order) and comes to place himself in the position of addresser of a second-order message having the first message as its reference, while a new addressee (the reader of the commentary, for example) comes to carry out the role previously held by the commentator in relation to the first message. When the initial message is denotative, the commentary, being denotative as well, keeps its own discourse in the same genre as the one on which it comments. But when the initial message is prescriptive, it seems inevitable that the commentary, being denotative, displaces the message's own genre. By taking the order *Close the door* as the object of his discourse, the commentator (whether he is a linguist, a logician, or a philosopher) substitutes for this order an autonomy¹⁸

of the sentence or of part of the sentence or, in other words, the name of the proposition.¹⁹

This substitution, which is the rule of the metalanguage of commentary, may have but little consequence when the object-statement is denotative, since its validity in the matter of truth is not *necessarily* disturbed (even if it should happen to be) by the fact that it becomes an "image" of itself in the metalanguage. But one could not be so confident when a prescriptive expression is involved; for an order does not ask to be commented on — that is, understood — but to be executed. Or perhaps: not only understood but also executed. Now the commentator, whatever turn of phrase he uses, does not go and close the door but asks, for example, how it is possible for the statement to produce an act instead of (or as well as) its intellection.²⁰ And in so doing he necessarily transforms the natural-language expression *Close the door*, which is "immediately" prescriptive, into a metalinguistic "image" of the expression.

The difference, and it is an immense one, is disturbing because the two expressions can be strictly identical. But the one, which belongs to the natural language (except when the latter makes use of autonyms) "expects" to be executed, whereas in the other, which is merely the reference level of the commentary, the executive is a sense that it connotes. The second expression may be the object of various transcriptions. It is either reported: *He said to close the door*. Or quoted: *He said, "Close the door,"* Or symbolized: $O(p)$, which reads, "It is obligatory that p " where p is, according to some, a well-formed expression of propositional logic²¹ (in this case a statement like *the door is closed*), or, according to others, a proposition root²², which here means roughly "the closing of the door by you". Or else it is symbolized in a perhaps more refined way: $Nx'Oy \propto'$, which would read, " x has ruled: y must do \propto ," where x is the order-giver, y the receiver, and \propto the action of closing the door.²³

But no matter how diverse the possible "images" of the order in the commentator's discourse may be (and there are many others), all these transcriptions have in common that they neutralize the executive force of the order. This neutralization is the index of a modification in the constraints that weigh on the addressee. In making himself a commentator, the addressee becomes an addresser: he has understood/heard a discourse, and he utters a second discourse having the first as its reference. The addressee of an order, on the contrary, does not have to come and occupy the position of an addresser. He has only to "cause to exist" the *reference* of the order that he received: to close the door.

Two observations. That it is a question of reference and not of signification in statements of this type is indicated by the use of the deictic: *the door* is understood as *the door of which I am speaking and which you know; this door here* (with the force of *ille*). To avoid the problems raised by the deictic and the reference, we will here be content to note that what gives the definite

article its deictic force in this statement is the perlocutionary situation: the current relationship between the addresser and the addressee of the order is what permits both parties alike to dismiss another interpretation of the article *the*, for example, its force of generality.

Is it the same for all prescriptive statements? That is a question to be discussed. It seems certain, in any case, that at least a subset of the set of these statements obeys this rule of perlocutionary force. Statements of a code applicable to a definite circumstance generally appear to escape the rule: the "legislator" is not a current addresser. But precisely the current addresser (policeman, magistrate, etc.), who we say is "applying" the statement of the code to the case being considered, is in fact bound to show, by the reasons adduced for his judgment (and if possible in contradiction to the addressee of that decision, who by definition has "his own word" to say about it), that the perlocutionary situation in which they are placed is truly one of those to which the statement of the code makes reference. His order is thus not executive, so long as the statement of his order does not receive its unambiguous force from the situation in which it is uttered, that is, so long as it is not indicated as executable. This is a property we can verify for all pragmatic situations where the message is imperative, for example, in agonistic situations (military, athletic, dialectic): the order is executive only to the extent that it makes reference to the current situation.

This first observation is trivially obvious. Yet it has an important counterpart. *Close the door* does not only make reference to *this door here*, but to a state of this door that does *not yet* exist. It is in this way that the addressee of the order "makes the reference exist": he produces a state of affairs. But it is also in this way that, once it is executed, the order loses all executive force, supposing that we repeat it as it is: we can *no longer* close a closed door. If we were to judge the value of an order according to its *conformity* to its reference, we would find ourselves faced with a difficulty that is peculiar to this genre of statement: such statements are never true in the sense of conforming to that of which they speak, for they either anticipate it when the reference is not correct, or they must not be correct when the reference is.²⁴

Let us be content with this vague formulation and draw from it an important consequence: that the time put into play in the pragmatic of commands is not only "punctual" in that it takes its ephemeral origin from the perlocutionary situation, but also that this time occasions paradoxes, at least according to the truth functions used in propositional logic, notably that of noncontradiction ($p \vee \sim p$), in that from this point of view to assert p (*the door is closed*) is always false at the moment when the order ($O(p)$: "it is obligatory that p ") is given.

This temporal property is not the least of the reasons that would incline us to think that the operators of "Aristotelian" propositional logic do not enable us to judge the value of prescriptive statements. More than any

others, these seem to require a "Diodorean" or suchlike logic, which introduces into the calculation of predicates and of propositions a time variable t that allows us to specify whether the proposition or reference being considered is true (or false) at the instant (now, n) of its enunciation, or before or after that instant. This relativization has significant effects on the logical calculation of propositions, and it is shown elsewhere that many classical "paradoxes" arise from it.²⁵ But here there is more at stake: if we want to situate commentaries on the scale (or on the lack of scale) demanded by Levinas, it is into the logic of prescriptive statements, not descriptive ones, that we must introduce the temporal variable. You may well imagine that the results will be all the more surprising.

For the present, let us merely show for one text of Levinas' that the two observations we have just made about the singular validity of prescriptive statements, according to the perlocutionary situation and the moment of their enunciation, are not alien to his work. It is a simple, and at the same time scandalous, text: for it declares that God himself, the number one enunciator by all accounts (though it is doubtful whether Levinas would agree with this title), is not concerned to, nor has no power to, calculate his orders as a function of situations anterior or posterior to, or independent of, the instant of giving them; and that accordingly there does not exist a tribunal (or stock exchange) of history where all acts (or shares) would be offset against one another with a view to liquidating debts. "Driven out of Abraham's house, Hagar and Ishmael wander in the desert. Their supply of water is finished; God opens the eyes of Hagar, who notices a well where she can give her dying son drink."²⁶ So far, nothing abnormal — we would expect no less from a god who is also goodness itself.²⁷

Yet this generosity arouses the concern and reproof of the heavenly counselors, the angels, who practice a rather unexpected Hegelianism, looking farther than the ends of their noses, calculating, thinking of world history: "The angels protest to God: 'wilt Thou give water to him who will later make Israel suffer?'" and God in his defense invokes the time of ethics and singular situations: "'What matters the end of history,' says the Eternal One. 'I judge each for what he is and not for what he will become.'" What each one *is* is what he alone is at the moment I am speaking to you.

It is not suggested that God judges without a criterion, nor that he has no criterion — although thought that ignores inference is perforce closely related to skepticism.²⁸ Some things must be refused, at least; so there must be a sign by which to recognize them, and it should be injustice.²⁹ But blood is not always a sign of injustice; injustice is not always and only the shedding of blood.³⁰ Ishmael will shed innocent blood: then he is unjust. But at the moment when God is speaking, he is dying of thirst; then he is suffering injustice. Injustice cannot be detected by any constant signs; on the contrary, to have recourse to the constancy of would-be clear signs, to the articles of the code, to established institutions, recourse to the *letter* as that

which allows the just to be separated from the unjust — that is unjust. The criterion “exists” but cannot be the object of omnitemporal descriptive statements. If it is grasped, it is not understood; it is grasped in the command received “before” it is understood, before it can be repeated by the addressee of the order, before it can give rise to commentary. It is grasped as beyond the appearance, as trace.³¹

We can see what is at stake in this question of commentary: the status to be given to the relations between prescriptive and descriptive statements, and hence between ethics and propositional logic; this is also the tension proper to Levinas’ work, which aims at nothing less than raising above tautology the expressions of obligation, or forbidding, of permission — that is, that entire region of the language where demands, pleas, orders, wishes, prohibitions, and so on are formulated. It aims at freeing the criterion of validity of “orders,” that is, the criterion of their justice, from any justification by truth functions.

An expression like *Welcome the alien*³², for example, must be able to be valid, not because it can be inferred from statements previously admitted, not because it conforms to older statements, but by the sole fact that it is *an order having in itself its own authority*. Hence it is in some sense an *order of an order*.³³ In this refusal to infer normative statements lies, in particular, the considerable importance attached by Levinas to the idea of *an-arrhy*.³⁴ Likewise, it is from such a refusal that his attacks on ontology — not only Heidegger’s but also Spinoza’s, for example,³⁵ draw their vigor: ontology is, after all, merely another word for the metalanguage that is applied to descriptive statements.

It is interesting to translate this repudiation of the *archè* and of being into pragmatic terms. In the order of the perlocutionary situation, it corresponds to the decision not to conduct a discourse having as its reference and model a prior discourse, even an enigmatic one, given by no matter whom. The hatred of the *neutral* constantly evinced by Levinas³⁶ is not directed at the unnameable in general, nor even at an unnameable that is presumed to speak, but at an unnameable that is assumed to be both speaking and spoken: that unnameable *of which* I speak or, to use the autonym familiar to philosophers, *of which* the *I* speaks and of which it (or I) speak(s) in order to say that it (this unnameable) speaks in its (or my) place, that is, in the place of the *I*, or of me. This aims at that constraint proper to the discourse of truth functions, which lets the enunciator attest the authenticity of his statement only if he assumes that what he is talking about is also what speaks through his mouth:³⁷ only if he assumes that the subject, which he is, is also (and is no less) the substance of which he speaks. The neutral that Levinas hates is precisely this substance assumed to be subject in the discourse of ontology. Whether this substance be called “being” and the discourse resting on it “ontology” rather than “metaphysics” is of scant importance when it is a matter of thinking exteriority as “marvel.”³⁸

The pragmatic reason for hating the neutral is that its assumption implies that the philosopher, the addressee of the message from the unnameable, comes and places himself in the position of addresser, in order to proffer his commentary from the same place as the assumed first addresser, the unnameable itself. In this replacement, ethics necessarily dissolves. Prescriptions drawn from ontology will be inferred from statements relative to the unnameable and assumed to have issued from it. It matters little whether they are true or false; what matters is that the imperatives of ethics will be judged good or bad only by their conformity with these statements, according to the rules of propositional logic. Now, that is enough in Levinas' eyes to make ethics pass under the jurisdiction of the true — a Western obsession — and succumb.

In this subordination of prescriptives to denotatives, the executive force of the former is lost, and so is the type of validity peculiar to them. To put it another way, this subordination has the effect of transforming all orders into metalinguistic "images" of themselves and each of the terms composing them into an autonym of itself. In ontological ethics we can no longer understand *Welcome the alien* but the *!Welcome the alien! of Levinas*,³⁹ that is, a proposition transcribed into the metalanguage that speaks of the same proposition placed in the natural language. By this fact alone it passes under the legislation of truth functions and loses the remarkable properties that it had in the natural language, notably those we observed pertaining to perlocutionary situation, time, and execution.

IV. Levinas and Kant: the Kantian "*widersinnige*"

Levinas' concern to safeguard the specificity of prescriptive discourse seems closely akin to the care with which Kant, in the second *Critique*, makes the principles of practical reason independent of those of theoretical reason.

After recounting the episode of Ishmael's great thirst, Levinas adds: "For human consciousness has the right to judge a world ripe at every moment for judgment, before the end of history and independently of that end."⁴⁰ This world, he says, is "peopled with persons." If it can be judged at every instant with no consideration of teleology or strategy or even of empirical context, it is because the power to judge not only inhabits it but constitutes it. This power is intact on principle and is not subject to any alteration deriving from situational factors; no alienation could be invoked to excuse or pardon bad judgments.⁴¹

This faculty of commanding and obeying in complete freedom, regardless of the circumstances, cannot fail to remind us of the autonomy of the will that is for Kant "the unique principle of all moral laws and the duties which conform to them."⁴² The author of *Otherwise than Being* seems to agree with the author of the *Critique of Practical Reason* that in order for the principle of the will to be moral, it cannot be inferred from statements describing the

empirical context, whether psychological, social, or historical, and that it cannot be justified by the various "interests" of which it is made up. Such statements, which would be denotative, would inevitably explain the act as the effect of causes and would thereby take away its specificity: that it is an uncaused cause. It is owing to this specificity that the act is not a phenomenon, not the object of a science of what is, but the expression of a noumenal freedom — and not apprehensible by any sensory intuition.

Yet this assimilation, however tempting, must be rejected. Practical reason is not an-archy. In Levinas' eyes, the specificity of prescriptive statements is not, and cannot be, sufficiently assured by the Kantian procedure. The reason for his mistrust is contained in a sentence that will serve as our guide: "There is no point in formally distinguishing will from understanding, will from reason, when you decide at once to consider as good will only the will which adheres to clear ideas, or which makes decisions only out of respect for the universal."⁴³ Although Descartes is a target here no less than Kant, we will restrict our cross-examination of the logic of the prescriptive to the latter.

The obstacle to logical justification posed by the prescriptive is the object "Of the Deduction of the Principles of Pure Practical Reason" in the first chapter of the "Analytic of Pure Practical Reason."⁴⁴ How can we deduce the moral law (the prescriptive statement) without making it lose its specificity? Although in the case of statements of theoretical reason, which are denotative, we cannot deduce the principles that govern their formation speculatively on the basis of "a priori sources of knowledge," we can at least have recourse to that *Surrogat*⁴⁵, that expedient, which is experience/experiment — which on the whole, other things being equal, proceeds in the same way as does the logician of the sciences who extracts, from the denotative statements given in the corpus that serves as his reference, the axioms (in the modern sense) that these statements presuppose. We know that for Kant, as a reader of Hume, the chief among these axioms is causality.

The relation between the statement of these axioms in the metalanguage of the Deduction and the object language, which is the discourse of the sciences, is isomorphic to the relation linking the language of science to the "givens" of experiment/experience. The isomorphism of the two relations in no way contradicts the fact that the first derives from the transcendental level and the second from the empirical level. On the contrary, it is this isomorphism that allows Kant to declare that the deduction of principles, which cannot be done directly "from the sources," uses experience/experiment as a *Surrogat*. It follows that this metalanguage — the discourse of the deduction of scientific principles and especially of causality — remains isomorphic, on its own level, to the object language that is its reference. This isomorphism is what makes the metalanguage possible. Without it, and without the above-mentioned "sources," how could the principles of theoretical reason, notably causality, be determined?

For the language of prescriptions, this isomorphism between the metalanguage of deduction and the object language, whose principles it must extract, fails. Prescriptive statements, far from being governed like denotatives by axioms such as causality, are themselves the causes of acts that they engender. This pure causality, or spontaneity of the moral law (i.e., the prescriptive statement *par excellence*), is not a fact of experience, since everything given in experience is governed by the infinite sequences of causes and effects, and since the cause of such-and-such is necessarily also thought of as the effect of so-and-so. Hence, there is an insurmountable allomorphism between the metalanguage of deduction, even considered as the establishment of axioms governing an object language, and the object language that is the prescriptive statement. This is why Kant asserts, concerning the deduction of the practical principle, that "one cannot hope to succeed as well as with the principles of pure theoretical understanding."⁴⁶ He even exposes the failure of the practical deduction with a sort of satisfaction when he writes: "No deduction, no effort of reason whether theoretical, speculative, or aided by experience can prove the objective reality of moral law; even if one were willing to renounce apodictic certainty, this reality could not be confirmed by experience and thus proved *a posteriori*." But he adds at once (and this seems to be the source of his satisfaction): "And nevertheless it sustains itself by itself."⁴⁷

Must we then abandon any attempt to deduce prescriptive statements? Here the Kantian analysis takes a strange turn (which is what Levinas' thought breaks with), for while Kant is pleased to recognize the impossibility of deducing the practical principle, that is, of deducing a metalanguage bearing upon prescriptives, he still maintains its functioning but inverts its direction (*sens*): "Instead of this deduction, sought in vain, of the moral principle, one finds something other and entirely paradoxical" ("*etwas anderes aber und ganz widersinnisches*").⁴⁸ One finds something *widersinnig*, a deduction that proceeds in the reverse direction to the one that was sought. The metalanguage that is Kant's transcendental discourse had to try to draw the principle of prescriptive statements (i.e., the moral law) from an object language (having as its model some experience or other). As we have just seen, if it had succeeded in doing so it would have been at the cost of abolishing the principle. It is therefore by failing that it succeeds.

This failure, however, does not do away with the possibility of the metalanguage; it inverts its direction, at the cost of modifying its object. What can still be deduced, in the absence of the law, is freedom. This deduction is made on the basis of the law. Thus, in the new deduction the law is placed not as a conclusion, as a statement extracted by the metalanguage from the object language, but as a premise, as a statement in the object language, about which the metalanguage infers that it presupposes a statement bearing on freedom. This is the reversal of direction: "This moral principle itself serves inversely as a principle for deducing an inscrutable [*unerforschlichen*] power . . . , I mean the power of freedom. . . ."⁴⁹

It follows that freedom is not expressed in any statement in the natural language, but can only be the object of a metastatement in the commentary. In contrast, the law or prescriptive statement is an expression in the natural language that cannot have a place in the metalanguage. The *Thou shalt* is "felt" by the empirical subject, the *Thou canst* is constructed by the philosopher in the transcendental language: empirically it remains unfathomable.

Apparently Levinas has no objection to this distribution — on the contrary, it corresponds to one of the most important themes of his work, the priority of the seizing (or dispossession) by the *Do* of the content of the order (*Do this*, or *that*) from any understanding, that is, from any commentary, which is necessarily denotative.⁵⁰

We may even be tempted to assimilate the place he assigns to freedom to the one that Kant reserves for it: does not the author of the *Critique*, by giving the expression about freedom the status of an inferred proposition in the metalanguage of practical reason, encourage the suspicion that moves Levinas to relegate freedom to the status of a second-order, inferior infatuation of the ego?⁵¹

Yet it is with respect to this hinge between law and freedom that the difference bursts out: a difference that is all the more profound because the two thoughts are related. Both, in effect, place the law in the domain constituted by the object language of their own commentary, and both recognize that this object domain is not that of experience. Kant proposes to "call consciousness of the fundamental law a fact [*Faktum*] of reason."⁵² In this *Faktum*, "pure reason manifests itself as really practical in us"; but for that very reason this "absolutely inexplicable" fact ("*ein schlechterdings . . . unerklärliches Faktum*")⁵³ is rather a sort of fact, a quasi-fact. Kant explains that the reality of pure will is "given *a priori* in the moral law as if by a fact" ("*gleichsam durch ein Faktum gegeben*").⁵⁴ "As if by a fact," not "by a fact." This fact is only a quasi-fact, since the determination of will by the prescription of law is not empirical and may never be established as a simple fact by means of a commentary, whose denotative model would be the deduction of the principles of theoretical reason.

This fact of prescription is so far removed from what a fact in the empirical sense is, so little capable of being subsumed under a concept that, once deduced, would permit us to fix its place in a moral experience, that Kant, in comparing it to sensory experience, calls it an idea: "The moral law transports us, in an ideal manner [*der Idee nach*] into a nature where pure reason, if it were accompanied by a physical power in proportion to itself, would produce the sovereign good."⁵⁵ The reference domain circumscribed by the quasiexperience of the *Thou shalt* is not nature, but "a supra-sensible nature," whose "idea serves as a model for the determinations of our will."⁵⁶ Moral experience is not an experience; the *Thou shalt* is not received in the realm of the sensible like something given in that realm. Yet it is received — that is why it can be called a fact; but it is received in the ideal.

Here again, Levinas would apparently not need to change anything, Levinas who tirelessly devotes himself to dissociating what belongs to the experience of the ego (material to be enjoyed or given a denotative commentary, within the limits we have stated) from what arises out of an untestable making-present of the other, by which is opened up a world of responsibilities transcending the world of enjoyment, although its effects are determined there.⁵⁷ Kant for his part, pursuing the theme of the *Faktum-Idee* right to its ultimate implications, concludes with that "marvel"⁵⁸ provided by moral law, which is, as in Levinas, the presence of transcendence: if the "fact" of the *Thou shalt* circumscribes an ideal nature (it is nevertheless efficient since it gives rise to those effects that are the acts that correspond to it — Levinas' "responsibilities"), it follows "that reason is itself through ideas an efficient cause in the field of experience," and that "its transcendent use" is thus, thanks to the *Faktum* of moral law, "changed into an immanent use."⁵⁹ Reason remains transcendent when it aims to circumscribe in its commentary the essence of empirical nature; but this transcendence is what assures its immanence when, in the form of the prescriptive, it constitutes ideal nature.

Now it is precisely there, on the question of efficiency, that Levinas must turn his back on the Kant of the second *Critique*.

V. Logical analysis of the Kantian statement of moral law

Causality is indeed the axis upon which Kant makes the deduction of the practical principle operate in reverse. Let us try to demonstrate this briefly. The prescriptive statement *Thou shalt* cannot be deduced: it is a sort of fact (as the scientific statement is for the critique of theoretical reason). The question asked of this "fact" by the *Critique* is not "How does this kind of statement find objects to which it may be applied?" (the critical question bearing on the theoretical use of reason).⁶⁰ It is rather: "Strictly speaking, how can this statement prescribe?" Now, to prescribe (and here is the axis) is "to be a cause without objects."⁶¹ The question that the *Critique* asks of the denotative statement is the question of the causality of objects upon representations: the classical question of truth or reference, in short. But when the object of commentary is the prescriptive statement, the *Critique* must invert the direction of the causality.⁶² This is the inversion of direction.

All the rest — the deduction, properly speaking — comes in consequence of this reversal, which is stated in the exposition of the principle of practical reason. For if prescription *must* be the cause of objects, it cannot receive its power of efficiency from any object given in experience. In this way all hypothetical imperatives are eliminated. And the only answer left to the question, How does the law prescribe? is "by an 'immediate,' 'transcendent,' 'unintelligible,' 'inscrutable,' power." This transcendent power is freedom, which is none other than pure reason itself, acting as a practical cause.

It seems that the properties able to qualify its power can be applied, just as they are, to the "other side of the face," which in the other, according to Levinas, commands us to act. Yet no one should be more hostile than the author of *Otherwise than Being* to this deduction of freedom, even when it is an inverted deduction: he would not fail to see therein the return of the denotative, and this in the very procedure by which the *Critique of Practical Reason* seeks to exclude it. This return is indeed effected in the form of the reversal of the Deduction, and first of all in the reversal of causality. In inverting the direction of causality, Kant believes he is emancipating will from experience. But the inversion leaves the concept itself, that of causality, intact, and nothing of this is inverted except the relation of order among the elements that it puts together (synthesizes). Kant justifies himself for this throughout the section that follows the Deduction, entitled "Of the Right of Pure Reason, in its Practical Usage, to an Extension which is not Possible for it in Speculative Usage."⁶³ What is more, he there calls openly for the inverted (i.e., noumenal) use that is made of causality in the second *Critique*.

Kant writes: "We are not satisfied with applying this concept [causality] to the objects of experience," and further, "We want to make use of it for things in themselves."⁶⁴ Now we are authorized to do so by the *Critique* of speculative reason itself which, in making this concept a principle of understanding and not as Hume claimed a *habitus*, a general appearance, born of experience, endowed it with a transcendental status. That this a priori cannot be valid outside its application to the givens of experience is the rule of knowledge. However, "it maintains a different relationship with the faculty of desiring,"⁶⁵ an inverse relationship whereby the effect is not received from a phenomenal cause but produced by an unconditioned cause. What authorizes the *Widersinnige* of causality (and of Deduction) is, in short, that the same concept of cause is put to two contrary uses, the one in knowing, the other in desiring.

What follows from this as regards statements? That the form of a denotative statement must not be fundamentally different from that of a prescriptive statement. The former effects the synthesis of two phenomena under the category of cause, while the latter effects the synthesis of an agent and an act under the same category (i.e., of cause). Admittedly the agent is noumenal, and the act is not given; these features are registered in the imperative aspect taken by the moral law. But it is simple to show that the main function of the statement of the law is to maintain the imperative within the limits of the indicative, that is, to subordinate the "inverted" mode of causality in desire to its direct mode in knowledge, or in other words to identify the predication that denotes a given "nature" with the predication that prescribes an ideal "nature." Let us try to expose the denotative form concealed by the categorical imperative.

The fundamental law of practical reason is enunciated thus: "Act in such a way that the maxim of your will can always be valid as the principle of a

universal legislation also" (*"Handle so, dass die Maxime deines Willens jederzeit zugleich als Prinzip einer allgemeinen Gesetzgebung gelten koenne"*).⁶⁶ This statement can be analyzed initially into two parts: *Act*, and *In such a way that*. . . . *Act* can be rewritten as *Do something*, which in turn may be understood as (i) *Thou shalt*, the pure prescriptive, *It is obligatory that* . . . ; (ii) *To do something*, which as we have seen may be taken either as a well-formed expression in propositional logic, *A thing of some kind is done*, or else as a proposition root, *The doing of something* (by you). In Von Wright's notation,⁶⁷ this part would be expressed $O(p)$, where O is the operator of obligation and p the proposition being considered.

But it will not be forgotten that the moral law must not determine the will except by its "form," and that the "matter" to be found in it (e.g., a motive ([*Triebfeder*])⁶⁸ could not operate in it as a cause, except by falling back into the phenomenal and the infinite chain of causalities. It follows that the expression p must present some remarkable properties.

These appear easily if we rewrite the expression in the notation of Alchourrón and Kalinowski.⁶⁹ $O(p)$ is written $Oy\infty$, which reads, " y must accomplish ∞ ." Let it be agreed that y here designates the particular (or singular?) addressee of the order, named "*Thou*." The order would have the developed expression $\exists y(Oy\infty)$ and the signification "There is at least one y and this y must accomplish ∞ ."

But especially since the aim is to write a prescription that does not determine the "matter" of the action to be accomplished, it is appropriate in the expression $Oy\infty$ to substitute for ∞ , which designates a determined action, a symbol ζ , which will designate the action not determined by itself, the unspecified action, which is the target of the Kantian law — or a variable of an unknown action. The first part of the statement of the law is thus written $Oy\zeta$ and read, "Accomplish an undetermined action."

To move on to the second part of the statement of the law: "That the maxim of your will can always be valid as the principle of a universal legislation also." It indicates that the maxim of the will that motivates the action (by itself the action is a matter of indifference) is equally formulable as a universal norm. The maxim of the action is none other than $Oy\zeta$. According to the chosen convention, the fact that a prescription should be valid as a norm (or as the principle of a law) is written $Nx'\text{'}$, which is read, " x has ruled: -," where x designates an agent and N a norm function that presents as a norm the expression placed in inverted commas on its right.

This operator is not to be confused with the one designated by the symbol O . "It is obligatory that. . . ." The latter belongs to deontic logic, or the logic of prescriptions, while the operator marked N derives from the logic of norms. An expression such as $Nx'Oy\infty'$ reads, "There is a norm decreed by x which declares: y must accomplish ∞ ." This reading brings out that the function N is descriptive; it denotes the fact that the expression placed on its

right is a norm, whereas the function O is prescriptive, indicating that the action ∞ must be accomplished by y .

It can be seen that the expression $Nx'-'$ is to the expression $Oy\infty$ as a metastatement is to a statement in the object language. The inverted commas around $Oy\infty$ in the statement of the norm attest that the statement of the prescription is here a quotation made by x , and that the reader, the addressee of the complete message, is dealing with the "image" of the deontic statement in the metalanguage of norms. These observations refer back to those made above⁷⁰ on the subject of the neutralization of the prescriptive in the metalanguage that comments on it: the commentary that concerns us consists in declaring that the prescription is a norm.

It is in this metalanguage of norms that, according to Kant, the maxim of a particular action can be declared the principle of a universal legislation. The obligation $Oy\zeta$, obligation for a particular subject y to accomplish the indifferent action ζ , is taken as the object of a meta-assertion, which declares it a universal norm. The one who can declare it such is any subject whatever. Thus, x in $Nx'-'$ symbolizes here an agent which has the universal quantifier, and this is developed as $\forall x(Nx'-')$.

We can now write the second part of the statement of the law, still agreeing, however, to ignore for a moment the operation that links it to the first part, which Kant enunciates as *in such a way that*. Isolated then, this part is expressed, *The maxim of your will can always also be valid as the principle of a universal legislation*. The "maxim of your will" is the norm enunciating that the act is obligatory for the agent. Let us recall that the act in question was posited in the first part of the statement as an indeterminate act. Finally, if this norm is only subjective, the subject who enunciates it as such is the same as the one who makes for himself an obligation to act as he does. The "maxim of will," which commands the particular obligation to act, is thus written $Ny'Oy\zeta'$, which reads, "At least one subject has ruled: At least one subject must accomplish the said indeterminate action."

As regards the end of the second part of the statement of the law, *can always also be valid as the principle of a universal legislation*: It names the predicate that is always attributed to the "maxim of your will," at least if the action that the will commands in accordance with this maxim is just (or moral). This predicate is *the principle of a universal legislation*. The principle of a legislation is a norm. If the legislation is universal, this norm is decreed by any subject declaring norms. Moreover, the obligation thus elevated to the status of a universal norm is evidently the same one that commands the agent designated at the beginning (*Thou*) to accomplish the (indeterminate) action in question in the first part of the statement. Ultimately Kant does not intend only for that agent at least to be made to submit to the said universal legislation, but any agent whatever. Hence we will write the predicate in question $\forall x(Nx'Ox\zeta')$.

The expression *can always be valid as*, which links the predicate to the subject of this second part of the statement of the moral law, is to be understood: "Each time that $NyOy\zeta$, then it is necessary that $NxOx\zeta$." We must not let ourselves be deceived by Kant's use of the modal verb *can* (German *können*). It cannot here have the force of probability, or even of very great probability, which it can elsewhere denote in French, as in German;⁷¹ such meaning would ruin the scope of the law that Kant would have "fundamental" and that would then merely be very likely. The fact that the particular maxim *can always be valid as* a universal principle signifies that every time there is the maxim, then it is valid every time, as that principle. What commands the meaning of the necessity that we attribute to the modal verb is the adverb *always* (*jederzeit*, every time), which is the temporal index of the universality of a proposition, as *necessary* that is its modal index. So we will express this meaning by the sign of implication (or logical conditional): *If p, then q, or $p \supset q$* . This provides the following expression for the second part of the statement of the moral law: $(Ny'Oy\zeta') \supset (\forall xNx'Ox\zeta')$, that is, "If at least one subject has ruled: The said subject at least must accomplish the said indeterminate action, then any subject whatever has ruled: Any subject whatever must accomplish the said indeterminate action."

Let us finally come to the operation by which the preceding statement, which expresses the second part of the statement of the fundamental law, finds itself modified into the complete statement. The question is to know how this second part is articulated with the first. The articulation of the Kantian statement is *in such a way that* (*so, dass*). This is of the greatest importance for Kant, since it is what comes to determine the action, otherwise indeterminate, that the subject makes for himself the obligation of accomplishing, and since the determination takes place (as Kant repeats) only through the "form" of the maxim and not through its "matter." Now, what Kant calls the "form" of the maxim is none other than the second part of the statement of the law that we have just described. It is only if the norm bearing on the obligation to accomplish an action can be decreed as a universal norm that the accomplishment of the said action can be obligatory. It follows that the subjective obligation is legitimate, that is, constituting the object of a norm, only if it can also constitute the object of a universal norm.

The operator that unites the two parts of the Kantian statement is thus that of equivalence (or of biconditionality): *p if, and only if, q, or $p \equiv q$* .

Do whatever it is if, and only if, the norm of what you must do is also a universal norm. Or to put it more rigorously: "At least one subject must accomplish such-and-such an action if, and only if, one subject at least having ruled: At least one subject must perform the said action, then any subject has ruled: Any subject must perform the said action."

To write this, we will replace the sign of the indeterminate action with the sign of the determinate action, since the complete statement of the law

henceforth allows us to determine (formally) the action to be accomplished. We get the following expression:

$$Cy_{oc} \equiv [(Ny'Oy_{oc}') \supset (\forall xNx'Ox_{oc}')].$$

We find in many of Kant's explanations confirmation of the proposed reading of the expression *in such a way that* as an operator of equivalence. This operator is not a simple conditional (or inference). For the moral law does not only say, "If the norm of such-and-such an action is a universally obligatory norm, then you must perform this action." It also says, "If you must accomplish such-and-such an action, then the maxim of your will (= your particular norm) is a universally obligatory norm." Not only *if p, then q*, but also *if q, then p*. That the universality of the norm is a condition of validity of the action is something that no one can fail to understand in the second *Critique*. But we cannot restrict ourselves to this simple condition; the morality of the act must also be a condition of the universality of the norm.

The first condition is to be understood as the determination of the will by the pure law, that is, by pure reason in its practical usage. The second condition is to be understood as the determination of the law by pure will, that is, again by pure reason in its practical usage. In effect, practical reason is both legislation, (that is, pure synthesizing power and, so to speak, power to enunciate a nature) *and* at the same time efficient causality, that is, power to produce and power, so to speak, to institute a nature. As legislation, it requires universality as the condition of any obligation to act. As causality, it requires pure will, that is, freedom, which emancipates its effects from nature as explained by theoretical reason, which places them in a suprasensible nature.

Thus the equivalence indicated by our operator appears to be merely the transcription into the conventions of logical notation, of the identity admitted by Kant between reason that rules and reason that wills. The reciprocal implication, or biconditionality, between these two powers appears clearly in a phrase like the following: "Pure practical laws are . . . necessary, if freedom is assumed, or inversely freedom is necessary, because these laws are necessary, as practical postulates."⁷²

The same applies for Kant's insistent emphasizing that will is pure only if it is "absolutely" and "immediately" determined. Then "it is all one (*einerlei*) with pure practical reason."⁷³ This immediate identity is only possible if the will is guided solely by the legislation of reason, which has universal value. If will, then reason, that is, universality; and if reason, then will.

VI. Levinas against Kant

What have we shown by this? That a prescriptive statement, the obligatory symbolized by *O*, is equated with the description of this statement, which

makes of it a norm N — on one condition only, it is true. This is that the norm of particular obligation can be rewritten as a universal norm: but this condition can itself be entirely expressed in the logic of norms and does not make any new obligation appear, only an implication of propositional logic attributing a change of quantifier to the subject who enunciates the norm.

This equivalence of the prescriptive and the descriptive in the statement of the law was prepared, so to speak, by the inversion of the practical Deduction, and above all by the reversal of usage of causality. The latter is valid as a model for any synthesis of elements in the descriptive statements of science. When Kant detects its new usage in the prescriptive statements of morality, he declares it to be inverted as to its effects: in theoretical reason, causality synthesizes the givens; in practical reason it produces them. But this reversal now seems to be something other than an inversion of direction on one and the same axis.

A simple inversion of that sort would result from a reciprocal transformation. A reciprocal transformation manifests in particular the property of transforming an implication $p \supset q$ in such a way that where R symbolizes the transformation in question, we have $R(p \supset q) = q \supset p$. This transformation is situated in the realm of propositional logic and affects only the form of the statements.

But that is not true of the Kantian *Widersinnige*. The transformation noted by Kant escapes from propositional logic: in displacing the cause from the "noumenon" side on the basis of the "phenomenal" position accorded to it by theoretical reason, it does not operate, or does not only operate, as a reciprocal transformation, inverting the order of the premise and the conclusion in the statements; nor for that matter does it operate as any one of the other three transformations admitted by propositional logic. What it introduces as the premise of that conclusion (i.e., the prescriptive statement of the moral law) is the "subject" of the enunciation of this statement itself.

The practical Deduction does indeed start out from the moral law, as from an ideally tested premise, but only in order to deduce it and substitute for it a premise that is untested even ideally and that is even inconceivable — namely, will. If will remains "unintelligible," it is because it cannot be placed in a propositional statement, that is, in a discourse with a denotative function, arising from theoretical reason and having nothing to do with this genre of unintelligibility. When Kant says that will, if it is pure, prescribes the law, he keeps it in principle outside the statement of that law — which is marked by the imperative form of that statement. Hence the will does indeed occupy the place of the subject of the prescriptive enunciation, which escapes *ex hypothesi* from any descriptive statement (i.e., from all intelligibility).

This "absolute exteriority" of that which commands, so precious to Levinas but also to Kant, is precisely what Kant causes to vanish, by identifying the

power of the subject of the practical enunciation with causality and by conceiving causality as the same category that permits theoretical reason to form its denotative expressions well. Or in other words, by identifying reason as prescriptive will with reason as descriptive causality.

In the language we are using here, we will say, then, that what is at stake in the discourse of Levinas is the power to speak of obligation without ever transforming it into a norm.

VII. Pragmatic analysis of the Kantian statement of moral law

To clarify the scope of what is at stake, let us go back to the pragmatic point of view, in which we have noted,⁷⁴ that the addressee of an order is in a quite different situation from the addressee of a discourse of knowledge. The discourse of knowledge is a genre of discourse that authorizes, and even encourages, the addressee to begin to speak, either to proffer in his turn some statement on the same "subject" (i.e., the same reference) as the first enunciator, or to comment on what the latter has said about this same reference, or to mix the two in a composite discourse. But the recipient of an order has hardly any latitude, at least not if he means to restrict himself to the world of prescriptions: he can only carry it out or not carry it out. If he argues about it, comments on it, negotiates over it, he inevitably substitutes for the order received the "image" of this order that the negotiation, commentary, or argument take as their reference, and he escapes *ipso facto* from the universe of prescriptions into that of denotations.

Now we have just seen that the insertion of an order into a statement declaring that order to be a norm is a particular case of the above situation. The one, whoever he is, who promotes an obligation to the dignity of a norm is an addressee of that order who takes it as the reference of his discourse and, in so doing, moves into the position of addresser of a new statement, the commentary that makes the order into a norm. It is of course conceivable that he did not gain knowledge of that order directly but was told of it; it could be objected that the order thus did not reach him equipped with its executive power, but was already neutralized and repeated as a quotation in a descriptive discourse. This is possible; but the situation is then merely displaced: someone, whoever he is, necessarily, rightly or wrongly, must not have "taken upon himself" the order he heard, so that this order could be made the object of a commentary, even if this commentary consisted of a declaration that the order were valid as a norm.

Such, in particular, is the situation of the enunciator named Kant in respect of the moral law. We have just described the statement of the moral law in the conventions of Alchourrón and Kalinowski. If we now had to write the Kantian statement that declares this law to be the "fundamental law" of practical reason, that is, a norm *par excellence*, it is clear that we

would have to place before our expression of the law a supplementary prefix such as $Nk'-'$. This prefix belongs to the logic of norms and reads "*Kant has ruled: '-'*," where the symbol $' - '$ designates the statement of the law, properly speaking.

The complete Kantian statement would then be expressed:

$$Nk'Oy\infty \equiv (Ny'Oyx') = (\forall xNx'Ox\infty)'$$

This reads (omitting the outer quotation marks so as to simplify the notation):

A subject named Kant has ruled: "One subject at least must perform the action ∞ if, and only if, one subject at least having ruled: One subject at least must perform the action ∞ , then any subject has ruled: Any subject must perform the action ∞ ."

A reading like this brings out that Kant — one at least of the addressees of the obligation y — comes to occupy the position of an addresser, inasmuch as he sets up the first obligation as a norm.

The same goes for the reader of the *Critique of Practical Reason*. By reading Kant's commentary, he makes himself the addressee not of the obligation enunciated by the moral law encased in this commentary (as an "image" of itself) but of the discourse by which Kant raises this obligation to the dignity of a norm. As the addressee of denotative propositions, he is required to understand but not to do. He can comment on the commentary in his turn and thus pass into the position of enunciator by the same right as Kant.

This substitution appears legitimate in the case of the reader of the *Critique of Practical Reason*: what he reads is not an order but the declaration that the order *Act in such a way that . . .* is a norm. Now, the statement of an obligation is not an obligation. In this respect, it seems that the reader of Levinas is in a position no different from that of the reader of Kant. If he reads the order *Do before understanding* in this or that book by Levinas⁷⁵ it is, so to speak, understood (*entendu*) that he will not stop understanding (or reading) in order to do and that he "must" understand this statement, not as a command but as the quotation or image of that command reported in Levinas' metalanguage.

There is no difference between the two readers in this regard: the one, like the other, is authorized by his position as reader of a book of philosophy to neutralize the executive force of the order that he reads there and to place himself in the position of possible commentator; but the same does not hold true of the two "authors."

Kant can denote the moral obligation as a norm because universality is already implied in its formula. When "Kant has ruled: 'One subject at least must accomplish such-and-such an action, etc.'," he is doing nothing other

than applying to the order *Act in such a way that . . . the argument from the moment that the obligation to which you are submitted can be universalized as a norm*. Kant's commentary can denote the order as a norm since this order is executive only on condition that it has been denoted as a norm by the one who is to execute it. Kant can comment on it as a norm since that is what the agent must already have done in order for his action to be moral. To speak in formal terms, the k that we have made appear in the Nk is a case of the Nx that the Ny must imply for the obligation to be valid.

For the moment we will not follow this clue any further, despite its importance. Let us be content to observe that the moral imperative, which on the one hand is set up as a universal norm by Kant and on the other hand equates the obligation with the universal norm in its statement, appears to rest on a *petitio principii*, belonging to the first type recognized by Aristotle, when "one postulates the very thing one has to demonstrate." Kant has to demonstrate that the statement of the moral law is universally valid. Now, by introducing into this statement the biconditional *if and only if* . . . what else is he doing but postulating that the maxim, if it is valid, becomes the moral law?

Yet, if we reestablish the different levels of language the *petitio principii* is not certain:

Object language: *Do that*.

Metalanguage 1: *Do that iff/Do that/is universalizable*.⁷⁶

Metalanguage 2: *Do that iff/Do that/is universalizable/is universalizable*.

The first level of language here is prescriptive; the second, that of the metalanguage or commentary, establishes the equivalence of prescriptive and denotative; the third, which cites the second, is purely denotative. For there to be a *petitio principii*, the metalanguages (1) and (2) would in reality have to be of the same species and at the same level. This would be the case, for example, if the last statement, that is, the Kantian commentary, were prescriptive and if one could substitute */that/* for the expression */Do that iff/Do that/ is universalizable/*. In that case the statement would be: *Do (= Say) /Do that iff/Do that/ is universalizable iff/ Do (= Say) //that// is universalizable*, where the last */that/* is substituted for the first complete expression between bars. Intuitively transcribed, and with simplified quotation marks, we have: *Say [Statement of the moral law] iff [Say (Statement of the moral law)] is universalizable*.

Obviously, this is not the Kantian statement: Kant does not order his reader to declare the statement of the law obligatory on condition that it is universalizable. Kant does not order his reader to do anything practical. That the reader *may* or *must* say something about the statement of the moral law is not on account of a permission or an obligation; it is a modalized inference. The reader of the book is placed before a universe of denotative statements, to which the third-order statement fully belongs. The prescriptive statements that he encounters in the Kantian commentary are always

only "images" of themselves. Hence it is legitimate to assert that what saves the Kantian statement from the *petitio principii* is the recourse to denotative metalanguage.

VIII. "Obey!"

But this recourse is at the same time a kind of scandal, since it rests on the equivalence, in the second-order statement, of a prescriptive and a descriptive statement: this is the scandal that Levinas denounces in a sentence we have already quoted.⁷⁷ For this equivalence is nothing other than the ego's infatuation with knowledge. By promoting the order he receives to the dignity of a norm, the addressee of the prescription subordinates the obligation that is linked to the prescription to the comprehension that what he understands (the maxim of the action) can be understood, and hence executed, by everyone. The order he receives is really an order only if it is mediated by a denotative metastatement. In consequence, the addressee of the moral law ceases to be in the place of the *Thou* to whom the prescription is addressed and who is expressed in the statement of this law by the second-person imperative, and he comes to occupy the place of the *I* who delivers the opinion that this prescription is or is not universalizable. By the fact of this displacement, the other from whom he receives the order — that other whom Kant, however, admits is "inscrutable" and whom Levinas strives to maintain in his transcendence — finds himself "placed in symmetry" with the ego. The irreducibility of the prescriptive is ruined, if it is true that it assumes an ineffaceable dissymmetry between the addresser and the addressee of the order.

This supposition, which governs the whole discourse of Levinas like a kind of metaprescription of alterity, can be expressed by the following statement: *That /Thou/ shalt never be /I/!*⁷⁸ Among the numerous occurrences of it that can be found in his books, the following is a philosophically-inspired one:

The differences between the others and me . . . depend on the I-Other orientation conjuncture, on the inevitable *orientation* of being "on the basis of oneself" towards "the Other" . . . Multiplicity in being, which refuses totalisation, but takes form as fraternity and discourse, is situated in an essentially asymmetrical "space".⁷⁹

But it is Levinas the commentator on the Talmud⁸⁰ who seems to grasp most closely the metaprinciple of asymmetry:

The incomparable character of an event like the giving of the Torah [is that] it is accepted before it is known. . . . The deed in question . . . is not simply the opposite practice to theory, but a way of *actualising*

without beginning with the possible. . . . They execute before having understood: . . . To understand a voice that speaks to you [is] *ipso facto* to accept the obligation in respect of the one who is speaking. . . . In this impossibility of hiding from the imperious call of the creature, the assumption does not in any way go beyond passivity.⁸¹

The question, then, is to know how to formulate a first-level prescriptive statement, expressed in the natural language of orders, that would satisfy the metaprinciple *That /Thou/ shalt never be /I/!*

Let us start again, according to the rapid description we made at the outset,⁸² from the situation of the commentator who finds himself faced with the works of Levinas: if he understands it, he must not understand it, and if he does not understand it, then he understands it.

In the batch of "paradoxes" that have come down to us from the principle adversaries of Plato and Aristotle, the Megarians and the Cynics, there exists a prescriptive statement that appears to produce a similarly contradictory effect. This is the order *Disobey!*

Aristotle notes it in the following context. Among the procedures of refutation used by the sophists, he gives the name *paralogisms* to those that, operating *exo tès lexeôs*, do not (or do not only) play on the *lexis* (or *dictio*) of the statement but make bad usage of the categories of thought.⁸³ In this way, a subset of these paralogisms rests, according to Aristotle, on a confusion of the absolute and the relative in attribution: *to aplôs versus kata ti*, or *to aplôs versus pè*. An example of a statement that plays upon such a confusion is . . . : *If the nonbeing is opinable* (= the possible object of an opinion), *then the nonbeing is*.⁸⁴ In order to refute this sophism, it is sufficient to reintroduce the obfuscated category *relation*. For, says Aristotle, "it is impossible for contraries and contradictories, affirmation and negation, to belong absolutely [*aplôs*] to the same object, but there is nothing against each of the two (properties) belonging to it in some way or in a certain regard or in a certain manner."⁸⁵ There then follows a further example of the same paralogism: "Is it possible for the same [subject] to obey and disobey the same [order or subject]?" Aristotle rejects such a possibility by a lapidary argument: "He who disobeys does not simply obey, but he obeys in something."⁸⁶

One can thus reconstitute the statement aimed at by the Stagirite as *Disobey!* However, this order is a paradox only on one condition, namely that it be understood as a complete statement. What does this mean?

Let us examine the case of its affirmative correlate: *Obey!* Customarily this statement is understood by its addressee as an abbreviation of a complete statement: *Obey the order that you have received in another connection!* One can thus distinguish two orders here: a first order, which carries the instruction about the act to be performed (*Close the door!*), and a second order (*Obey!*), which recalls that the first order is executive. Note that the

sequence *first order*, *second order* must be conceived as a logical rather than a chronological succession: the expression *Obey!* can, in "real" time, precede the order that gives the instruction, without this reciprocal transformation of the sequence's affecting the logical properties of its terms. In particular, the remainder of the order has in both cases an exclusively perlocutionary function: it orders its addressee not to perform an action but to receive the anterior or ulterior prescriptive statement in an attitude of carrying it out or, in other words, of being obliged by this statement.

One can always reject the expression *Obey!*, taken in isolation, because it is an incomplete statement, lacking an instruction. That is how Jean-Michel Salanskis⁸⁷ compares its inconsistency to that of an axiom such as *If a, then b. And a*. It is known that in order to make this axiom executable, Lewis Carroll's tortoise⁸⁸ demands a new instruction *c*, expressed as *If a, then b. And a. Then b*. But this instruction *c* must in turn be introduced into the inference that allows us to conclude *b*. *If a, then b. And a. And c. Then b*. This constitutes a new instruction *d*. And so on.

It is the same, observes Salanskis, for *Obey!* if we claim that it is a complete statement. Let *O* be the order *Obey!* and *e* its execution. This gives: *If O, then e. And O*. The instruction needed in order for the order to be executed is *If O, then e. And O. Then e*. But this instruction (which is here an order *O'*: *Obey the "Obey!"*!) introduces itself into the previous inference as a supplementary condition for the execution of *O*: *If O, then e. And O. And O'. Then e*. And soon the execution of the order will always be postponed, or — there will always be one instruction lacking.

One can use this argumentation (leaving aside for the moment the temporal properties of the expression *Obey!* which we will discuss elsewhere) the better to distinguish an interesting property of the statement *Obey!* This is the same property that Salanskis notes, we believe, in classifying this statement among the protodoxes. It is not one of the well-formed expressions, which satisfy a set of lexical and syntactical rules fixed in the metalanguage of deontic logic. It is one of the expressions that, in the natural language, allow us to gloss the metalinguistic symbol *O*, which also reads "It is obligatory that. . . ." This symbol is an operator whose property is to change the proposition or proposition root placed on its right into an obligation. By itself it could not constitute one of the well-formed expressions of deontic logic: those are (in monadic logic) of the form "*O(p)*," where *p* is a well-formed expression of propositional logic.⁸⁹ The logician makes clear, as well, that among the other expressions that are not well-formed deontic expressions are "those which repeat (iterate) a deontic operator."⁹⁰ He thus excludes as inconsistent not only an expression like "*O*" but also an expression like "*O(O)*." Thanks to this exclusion, the logician declares himself secured against some "paradoxes," which he does not name, but which we can guess.

There is thus a temptation simply to place the symbol *O* in the lexicon of the metalanguage that allows us to speak about the language of commands.

But this solution is unsatisfactory because of the confused usage in it of the word *metalanguage*. According to the acceptation of Russell and Tarski, it is defined as a second-order language in which it is possible to decide the truth value of expressions belonging to the first-order language. The operator *O* in no way fulfills this function, not even for the sake of the interest that might accrue to it as a result. That is because, once again, the propositions it permits us to put into form are not descriptive or attributive but prescriptive. If there exists some metalanguage relating to prescriptive propositions, it must no doubt be denotative as we have said; but then the operator of obligation, if it is part of it, does not there fulfill the same function as the truth functions imported from propositional logic. These alone enable us to declare that a relation between two prescriptive statements is true because, for example, one can infer the one from the other or false because, on the contrary, the one and the other are contradictory (operator of exclusion). But the operator of obligation, taken in itself, neither derives from the claim to speak truly when we encounter it in the prescriptive expressions of the natural language nor allows us to decide the validity of those expressions when we consider it as a deontic operator. It is indispensable, on the other hand, in whatever form of words it may occur, to the formation of prescriptive expressions. On the hither side of all alethic validity, it is the prescription that accompanies any instruction so as to make it obligatory.

Is this *hither-side* (*en-deçà*) what Levinas means to signify by his *beyond* (*au-delà*)? Perhaps; but even then we must not forget what such a statement has as its pragmatic correlate, which Levinas calls "passivity."⁹¹ Kant said of the *Ich denke* that it accompanies all our representations. This remark merely circumscribes what we previously called the enunciative clause.⁹² But the *Thou shalt* or the *Obey!* could not in the same way accompany all our prescriptions. The form of the statement of obligation is not only different from that of a statement in propositional logic but it also does not derive from the philosophy of enunciation alone. Because of the use that it necessarily makes of the second person, the prescriptive necessarily connotes a pragmatic — which is not the case for reflexives.

It follows that the enunciative clause cannot figure in the universe of prescriptive statements, for lack of an enunciative instance capable of making its very assertion an expression or a part of an expression. The exclusion of this clause has not at all the same function as the exclusion to which propositional logic proceeds in order to sanitize its field. Here this exclusion signifies that an expression can be considered prescriptive only from the point of view of its addressee. Whether or not one executes the order contained in it is another question; in any case, it is received as obligation and seizes the one who receives it (or dis-seizes him, as we would prefer to say) as its "obligee." Such is the condition that Levinas calls, among other names, "hostage."⁹³

The expression *Obey!* seems then to cover several of the properties that Levinas attributes to the ethical situation. It is an absolutely "empty"

proposition, since it is not provided with an instruction to make it executable, not even the meta-instruction of universality conceded by the Kantian statement of the moral law. It is not executable, but it is that which renders executory.

So it is not understood (*entendue*) in the sense of being comprehended (*comprise*), but only in the sense of being received. However, it is never in fact received in its own right but merely hidden in the form of complete or "full" prescriptive statements, that is, instructives. So it is indeed a "simple form" as in Kant, but this form is not that of universality, which is denotative; it is that of obligation, which is pragmatic. According to Levinas, "it" is not obligatory because "it" is universal; "it" is simply obligatory. Thus, "it" is to be done *before* "it" is understood. In this way, the Lord requires of Israel not obedience but rather obligation towards Him, before he instructs the people as to what they will be obliged to do.⁹⁴ In this way the domination of knowledge, that is, the infatuation with the enunciation, is interrupted.

In saying this, we place the accent on a pragmatic property of prescriptives that seems indeed to correspond to the metaprinciple of alterity *That /Thou! shalt never be III!* which we took as our guide. For to find oneself placed in the pragmatic position of being obliged is incommensurable with the position of enunciation, even of enunciating prescriptives. This incommensurability is the same as that of freedom with the condition of being a hostage. If there is freedom, it always and necessarily plays itself out on the enunciative instance. But the ethical and political question does not begin with that of the freedom enjoyed by the "I"; it begins with the obligation by which the *Thou* is seized. Not with the power to *announce* . . . , but with the other power, which in the West is regarded as a powerlessness⁹⁵ — that of being *bound to* . . .

This is so much so that, in the end, there is not even any need to have recourse to the negative form *Disobey* in order to restore faithfully the discomfort in which any addressee of an order finds himself. That would give too much credit to the power of the enunciative clause by itself. It alone can allow us, in the universe of denotative propositions, to transform any negative statement into an assertion; it is thus the safeguard of the profundity of paradoxes, if not of their validity, in this universe. But in the universe of prescriptions, it is not necessary to resort to the negative form of the statement (as in *Disobey*, or *Do not understand*, or *Do nothing but command*) in order to reveal the power that is attached to them and that preoccupies Levinas. For this power is not polarized on enunciative spontaneity but on receptivity to the order, on prescriptivity. The Megarians and the Cynics seek by means of paradoxes to shake the system of knowledge from the inside; for the Jews, the point is to escape from it. The simplest prescription, instructively empty but pragmatically affirmative, at one stroke situates the one to whom it is addressed outside the universe of knowledge.

At least two questions are left hanging: How does Levinas' commentary on this situation, a situation incommensurable with denotations, escape the trap of denotative metalanguage? How does his reader receive the commentary? Must we not revise the assimilation we made of Levinas' reader and the reader of the second Kantian *Critique*?

Notes

- 1 See DL 2d ed. 304–308, “Hegel et les Juifs.”
- 2 See QLT.
- 3 DL 2d ed. 268, 234; AEAE 6–9, 58–75, 195–205/OBBE 5–7, 45–59, 153–161.
- 4 AEAE 8/OBBE 7.
- 5 On the “there is” and on insomnia, see DEE 93ff./EE 57ff.; TeI 114ff./TI 140ff.
- 6 Aristotle, *Refutation of the Sophists* 167a1, 180a32; *Rhetoric* 1402a5.
- 7 B. Russell, *My Philosophical Development* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1959), chap. 7.
- 8 See TeI 81–160, *Interiorité et économie*/TI 109–186, “Interiority and Economy”; DEE passim/EE passim.
- 9 TeI 122/TI 148; emphasis added.
- 10 Cf. J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (New York: Oxford University, 1968); P. Grice, *Logic and Conversation* (unpublished, 1968); H. Parret, *La Pragmatique des modalités* (Urbino: Università di Urbino, 1975).
- 11 G. W. F. Hegel, *Phaenomenologie des Geistes* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1952), 19/*Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 9–10.
- 12 Hegel, *Phaenomenologie*, 21/*Phenomenology*, 11.
- 13 Terms borrowed from J. Habermas, “*Vorbereitende Bemerkungen zu einer Theorie der kommunikativen Kompetenz*,” in Habermas and Luhman, *Theorie der Gesellschaft oder Sozialtechnologie — Was leistet die Systemforschung?* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1971). See J. Poulain, *Vers une pragmatique nucléaire de la communication*.
- 14 On the properties of philosophical or “speculative” statements, see V. Descombes, *L'inconscient malgré lui* (Paris: Minuit, 1977), 142–178.
- 15 DL (2d) 379/ “Signature,” trans. M. E. Petrisko, ed. A. Peperzak, *Research in Phenomenology* 8 (1978), 188–189.
- 16 Hence the necessity to remove the writing of a Blanchot or a Roger Laporte (who are for Levinas the expression of *proffering*) from aesthetics and to class them on the side of ethics. This can be confirmed by reference to E. Levinas, *Sur Maurice Blanchot* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1975), 78 n. 3; and E. Levinas, *Noms propres* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1976), 133–137.
- 17 Aristotle, *On Interpretation* 17a3; cf. *Nicomachean Ethics* 1138b15–1140a24.
- 18 See J. Rey-Debove, *Le Métalangage* (Paris: Thèse de Doctorat d'Etat, Université de Paris VIII, 1977).
- 19 G. Kalinowski, *Du Métalangage en logique* (Urbino: Università di Urbino, 1975), 24.
- 20 “We say ‘the order orders this’ and we do it; but also ‘the order orders this: I must . . .’. We transfer it now into a proposition, now into a demonstration, now into an act” (L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 459).
- 21 See Von Wright, “Deontic Logics,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 4 (1969) no. 2.

- 22 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 22; R. M. Hare, "Imperative Sentences," *Mind* 58 (1949), 21–39; H. Keuth, "Deontische Logik . . .," in *Normenlogik*, ed. Lenk (München: K. G. Sar, 1974), 68.
- 23 The symbolization preferred by G. Kalinowski, *Du Métalangage en logique*, 18–19, and taken up by C. E. Alchourrón, "Logic of norms and logic of normative propositions," *Logique et Analyse* 12 (1969), 245.
- 24 Cf. Wittgenstein: "Here we mean: an order would be the image of the action which was executed in accordance with this order; but also an image of the action which must be executed in accordance with it" (*Philosophical Investigations* § 519).
- 25 See J. L. Gardies, *La Logique du temps* (Paris, PUF, 1975), 29.
- 26 DL (2d) 260; [*Genesis* 21:14–19 — Ed.]
- 27 Cf. HAH, "Humanisme et an-archie," 72–82.
- 28 See AEAE 57, 210–218/OBBE 44, 165–171; cf. the critique by Sextus Empiricus of categorical syllogisms.
- 29 "Where would the Jew get the strength of his refusal . . . ? the *No* requires a criterion. Rabbi Yossi will give the required sign: 'Let the waters of the cave of Parnais be changed into blood! and they were changed into blood' (Sanhedrin 98a). . . . The men who see cannot turn their eyes away from the innocent blood which they are diluting" (DL (2d) 278).
- 30 "In the just war waged upon war, tremble — yea, shudder — at each instant, because of this very injustice" (AEAE 233/OBBE 185).
- 31 TeI 161ff./TI 187ff.; HAH 57–63; AEAE 125–130/OBBE 99–102. [The next paragraph begins the portion of Lyotard's article that appears in *Textes pour Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. F. Laruelle, 127–150 — Ed.]
- 32 TeI Section I (1–78), 187ff./TI Section I (31–105), 212 ff.
- 33 "[The Other] commands me like a Master. A command which can concern me only insofar as I am a master myself; consequently a command which commands me to command" (TeI 188/TI 213).
- 34 AEAE Chapitre IV (125–166)/OBBE Chapter IV (99–129).
- 35 E.g., TeI 193/TI 217. Unless we read Spinoza transparently, as that which shelters the word of the law from demonstrative discourse, as Levinas means to do via S. Zac's *Spinoza et l'interprétation de l'écriture* (Paris: PUF, 1965). Cf. DL (2d), "Avez-vous relu Baruch?" 148–159.
- 36 E.g., TeI 274–275/TI 298–299. And the following: "None of the generosity which is supposed apparently to be in the German term '*es gibt*' was shown between 1933 and 1945. This has to be said!" (DL (2d) 375).
- 37 Except, of course, if he chooses the alternative hypothesis, which is to begin by defining the conventions thanks to which the metalanguage will be defined in which we can say whether the statements of the object language are true or false.
- 38 "Exteriority is not a negation, it is a marvel" (TeI 269/TI 292).
- 39 One can see the importance of the conventions of notation in these matters. The methodological remarks of J. Rey-Debove, *Le Métalangage*, 15–18, are particularly illuminating for the philosopher, as is her analysis of the Metalexicon, chap. 3.
- 40 DL (2d) 260.
- 41 Concerning pardon, see, e.g., TeI 259–260/TI 282–283.
- 42 Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft in Werke in Sechs Bände*, Bd. VI (Insel Ed., 1956), I § 8 /*Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. L. W. Beck (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949) Part I, Bk. I, chap. I, § 8 (144).
- 43 TeI 192/TI 217.
- 44 Kant, *Kritik* 155–165/*Critique* 152–160.

- 45 Kant, *Kritik* 161/*Critique* 157.
- 46 Kant, *Kritik* 160/*Critique* 156.
- 47 Kant, *Kritik* 160/*Critique* 157. This is why Kant attributes to it a sort of credit, "*Diese Art von Kredit*" (*Kritik* 162/*Critique* 158).
- 48 Kant, *Kritik* 161/*Critique* 157.
- 49 Kant, *Kritik* 161/*Critique* 157.
- 50 See QLT, second lesson, "*La tentation de la tentation*" ("The Temptation of Temptation").
- 51 "Imperialism of the Same," "effrontedly before the non-Ego," TeI 59/TI 87.
- 52 Kant, *Kritik* 141/*Critique* 142.
- 53 Kant, *Kritik* 156/*Critique* 153.
- 54 Kant, *Kritik* 170/*Critique* 164.
- 55 Kant, *Kritik* 157/*Critique* 154.
- 56 Kant, *Kritik* 157/*Critique* 154; and again: "This moral law must be the idea of a nature which is not given empirically, but which nevertheless is possible via freedom: the idea of a supra-sensory nature" (*Kritik* 158/*Critique* 154).
- 57 See, e.g., TeI "Moi et dependance," 116–125/TI "I and Dependence," 143–151; AEAE "La proximité," 102–124, "La Signification et la relation objective," 167–195/OBBE "Proximity," 81–97, "Signification and the Objective Relation," 131–152.
- 58 "*Ein merkwürdiger Kontrast*" (Kant, *Kritik* 155)/ "A marvelous contrast" (*Critique* 153).
- 59 Kant, *Kritik* 162/*Critique* 158.
- 60 Kant, *Kritik* 158–159/*Critique* 155.
- 61 Kant, *Kritik* 158/*Critique* 155.
- 62 "In the former [nature to which will is submitted], the objects *must* be (*sein muessen*) the causes of the representations . . . while in the latter [nature submitted to a will], the will *must* be (*sein soll*) cause of the objects" (Kant, *Kritik* 158/*Critique* 155).
- 63 Kant, *Kritik* 165–173/*Critique* 160–166.
- 64 Kant, *Kritik* 170/*Critique* 164.
- 65 Kant, *Kritik* 171/*Critique* 164.
- 66 Kant, *Kritik* 140/*Critique* 142.
- 67 Von Wright, "Deontic Logics," 136.
- 68 Kant, *Kritik* 146/*Critique* 146.
- 69 See Alchourrón, "Logic of Norms and Logic of Normative Propositions" and Kalinowski, *Du métalangage en logique*.
- 70 See Section III above.
- 71 On the linguistic value of modals, see: Culioli, "Modality," in *Encyclopédie Alpha* (1970), 168; and his "Ébauche d'une theorie des modalités," paper given to the Société de Psychanalyse, May 6, 1969; and his Seminar at the Ecole Normale, 1972–1973.
- 72 Kant, *Kritik* 160/*Critique* 156.
- 73 Kant, *Kritik* 141, 171/*Critique* 142, 164.
- 74 In section II above.
- 75 Particularly QLT.
- 76 Using "iff" to indicate the biconditional. The statements have been simplified on purpose here, at the risk of being inexact.
- 77 TeI 192/TI 217 (see note 43 above).
- 78 */Thou/* and */I/* being autonyms in this statement, we will write them in italics and between oblique strokes, in keeping with the conventions adopted. Cf. Rey-Debove, *Le Métalangage*, 17–18.

- 79 TeI 190, 191/TI 215, 216.
- 80 To be more exact, on the tractate *Chabat* 88a–88b. The passage in the *Chabat* that Levinas comments on is given in French in QLT 67–69.
- 81 QLT 91, 95, 98, 104–105, 108.
- 82 See Section I above.
- 83 Aristotle, *Refutation of the Sophists* 165b24.
- 84 Aristotle, *Refutation of the Sophists* 167a1.
- 85 “*Pè mētoi ékatéron è pros ti è pōs . . .*” (Aristotle, *Refutation of the Sophists* 180a26ff).
- 86 “*Oud’ho apeithōn peithētai alla ti peithētai*” (Aristotle, *Refutation of the Sophists* 180b1).
- 87 Jean-Michel Salanskis, *Autochronie et effets*, unpublished; “Genèses ‘actuelles’ et genèses ‘sérielles’ de l’inconsistant et de l’hétérogène” (*Critique* 379 (December 1978), 1155–1173).
- 88 Lewis Carroll, “What the Tortoise Said to Achilles,” *The Complete Works of Lewis Carroll* (New York: Modern Library, 1960), 1225–1230.
- 89 At least this is the position taken by Von Wright, “Deontic Logics.” Cf. N. Rescher, *The Logic of Commands* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), chapters 2 and 3.
- 90 Von Wright, “Deontic Logics,” 136.
- 91 See, among others, AEAE 141–143/OBBE 111–112.
- 92 See Section II above.
- 93 See, e.g., AEAE 150–151/OBBE 117–118.
- 94 See *Exodus*, chap 19.
- 95 Cf. the expression “X has no lesson to learn from anyone.” We find the exact opposite view of this infatuation in the Levinasian theme of reading, study, of the *to learn*, and finally, in that cardinal idea that the other is by virtue of its position the master of the *I*, *no matter where the prescription comes from, because it transcends the freedom of the I*.

A NOTE CONCERNING THE ONTOLOGICAL INDIFFERENCE

Jean-Luc Marion

Translated by Jeffrey L. Kosky

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The debate in question

Today, there is an obligation that I must fulfill. The theme of my talk was in fact imposed on me since it continues an already old debate: with a bit of insolence and naïveté, I had, in 1977, raised the following objection against Levinas's undertaking and his debate with Heidegger.

According to the evidence, the privilege, in being displaced from Being to beings [*de l'Être à l'étant*], consecrates the pre-eminence of the latter, as the Other,¹ only by inverting the ontological difference, thus by consecrating it. . . . In a word, the surplus of beings [*l'étant*] over Being [*l'Être*] certainly does not suffice to overstep ontology towards the Other because this surplus supposes, still and in its own way, the ontological difference.²

Instead of neglecting this imprudent accusation, which would have been, if not legitimate, at least comprehensible, Emmanuel Levinas generously believed himself obliged to respond to it, and, in fact, he pursued the explication of his own work in the same way. Indeed, in this same year, 1977, *De l'existence à l'existant* bore an explanation in the Preface to the second edition:

To see in the “existant,” in the human “being,” and in what Heidegger will call “the beingness of beings” not an occultation and “dissimulation” of Being, but a stage towards the Good and towards the relation to God and, in the relation between beings, something other than the

“ending metaphysics”—all this does not signify that one simply inverts the terms of the famous Heideggerian difference by privileging beings to the detriment of Being. This reversal will have been *only the first step* of a movement which, opening onto an ethics older than ontology, will let significations signify from beyond the ontological difference, which without a doubt is, in the final analysis, the very signification of the Infinite. This is the philosophical process going from *Totality and Infinity* to *Otherwise than Being*.³

This remark contributes several pieces of information. First, one must admit a strict periodization between 1961 (*Totality and Infinity*) and 1974 (*Otherwise than Being*). Second, this periodization corresponds to a theoretical progress concerning the ontological difference: the simple privilege afforded beings in 1961 would be answered by the overcoming of the ontological difference as such in 1974.

Obviously, it remains for us to assess this response. If even Levinas must, after the fact, underline such an essential periodization, this is without a doubt because it does not appear evident right away. The blame for this, no doubt, belongs first of all to the ignorance or confusion of mediocre readers,⁴ but perhaps also to the difficulty of the thing itself—a difficulty for Emmanuel Levinas himself, in his self-interpretation. For my part, I ought to have immediately taken account of such a kindly and precise response. Unfortunately, I did not do so explicitly—even if, in 1982, *God Without Being* made its own the intention of *Otherwise than Being*, namely, to hear *a God not contaminated by Being* (AE x; OB xlii). In addition to a certain reticence before a master, a prejudicial difficulty also stopped me—that of correctly determining the formation and development of the ontological difference according to Heidegger. It was therefore only much later that the debate could be resumed seriously.⁵ Much later—that is to say, perhaps today. I do not mean to respond fastidiously here to the improved resolution which Emmanuel Levinas has brought to the issue: it is illuminating and convincing, and thus cuts to the heart of the debate. I would like only to understand it completely, to deploy all its implications, in brief, to give the full right of a response to the very thought which at first I had had the pretense to oppose. Henceforth, it will be a matter of defending and illustrating as far as possible the avowed ambition of Emmanuel Levinas in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*: to surpass the ontological difference by ethics.

Naming the ontological difference

Beyond essence—the formula itself already harbors a difficulty; for, here, essence no longer designates beings in their proper or generic determination. In contrast to the most frequent usage, “the term *essence* here expresses

Being different from *beings*, the German *Sein* distinguished from *Seiendes*, the Latin *esse* distinguished from the scholastic *ens*" (AE ix; OB xli). "In this work, the term *essence* designates Being as differentiated from beings" (AE 29n.1; OB 187n.1). In this way, Levinas contradicts exactly the option taken, somewhat earlier, by Etienne Gilson who shared the aim of confronting Heidegger: Gilson opposes *Being* as *esse* to *essence* as *beings*, while Levinas assimilates *essence* to *Being*, therefore to *Sein* (*Seyn*), in contrast to *Seiende*. Therefore, one must understand *essence* in terms of the strongest (the verbal) meaning of *ousia*: "The term *essence*, which we do not dare spell *essance* . . ." (AE 3n.1; OB 187n.1), will sometimes be written as "essance" (AE 52; OB 40).⁶ One must therefore always understand by it the deployment of Being on the surface of beings, thus all that Heidegger names the "fold" and Levinas "the amphibology of Being and beings" (AE 131n.7; OB 194n.7). The brutal modification of the usual acceptation of the term *essence* marks, in fact, the ambition to think in essence—in *essance*—the articulation of Being and beings; thus, each occurrence of "essence" already designates the ontological difference. But, giving it a name does not suffice for naming it, nor for thinking it as such—Heidegger learned this at his own expense. Here, with essence, only a pure ontological characteristic is as yet attested, one without any specification; the difference therefore remains in itself absolutely undetermined, and the differential character of essence undecided.

Therefore, the critique will take the precaution of first establishing the ontological as a difference. For, from the beginning, the ontological difference is quite explicitly at issue. However, it is of interest only as seen from the exterior, as a fortress which one approaches in order to besiege it; from the beginning, the phenomenological analysis sets out in search of an "exception putting out of order the conjunction of essence, beings, and the 'difference'" (AE x; OB xli; see also AE 29; OB 23). This systematic and radical putting out of order of all essence, which names the terms of the "fold" only by immediately separating them into so many *membra disjecta*, throws the shadow of a refusal over the difference; consequently, it names it a difference less often than an "amphibology of Being and beings."⁷ "Amphibology" does indeed mark the ambiguity "in which Being and beings can be understood" (AE 54; OB 42); but, above all, it anticipates the disqualification of the ontological difference by a more radical instance: "The distinction and the amphibology of Being and beings will turn out from the start to be important and to be determinant for truth, but this distinction is also an amphibology and does not signify the ultimate" (AE 29; OB 23). The notion of amphibology is substituted for that of difference because "beyond or on the hither side" of Being and beings (AE 55, 63; OB 43, 49), an absolutely new term, as yet unnamed, insinuates itself. From the outset, the ontological difference no longer offers a goal, but only a point of departure, a given to be over-interpreted and destroyed. The difference becomes an amphibology not only because it consists *de facto* in the ambiguity of

beings in their Being and of Being always in a being, but, above all, because it differs from this first amphibology, from this first difference; the difference becomes amphibological, because it is held under a gaze which, since forever, has been trying to envisage it as already more ontological. The difference appears only in order to disappear.

As ontological, the difference must disappear: its transgression (*epekeina*, beyond) belongs to its very manifestation. In effect, before it, the Saying intervenes (AE 63; OB 49). In contrast to the *logos* which, according to Heidegger, is said on the basis of and in view of the ontological difference, Levinas's Saying annuls and renders this difference radically subordinate. In this way, there arises, in the very same movement, the ontological difference (destroyed as amphibology) and that which differs from it, a sort of difference from the (ontological) difference—a difference of the second degree. The texts are not lacking which establish this redoubling of the difference by a new difference (*un nouveau différent*). Sometimes the two differences are articulated explicitly, as in, "to state a difference beyond that which separates Being and nothingness" (AE 6; OB 3). More often, only the second difference is named explicitly while the first (ontological) difference remains implicit: "the thought that names creation differs from ontological thought" (AE 144; OB 113); "the otherwise than Being which, to be sure, is understood in Being differs absolutely from essence" (AE 19; OB 16); "the Saying that signifies the difference between the one and the other as the one for the other, as non-indifference to the other" (AE 206–7; OB 162). One result is decisively established: ethics is instituted by a new difference, a difference of the second degree, between, on the one hand, the entire ontological difference and, on the other hand, the Saying. Therefore, the beyond of the ontological difference absolutely cannot, here, be confused any longer with a reversal of the terms inside the ontological difference to the benefit of beings. "The hither side or the beyond of Being—this is not a being on the hither side of or beyond Being; but it also does not signify an exercise of Being, an essence, that is truer or more authentic than the Being of beings" (AE 57; OB 45).⁸ It is, rather, the irruption of the Saying as it puts the Other into play. In brief, "essence [is] exceeded by the Infinite" (AE 15; OB 12); "Being must be understood on the basis of the other of Being" (AE 20; OB 16). The ontological difference loses all grandness, all rigor, all meaning as soon as an "order more grave than Being and anterior to Being" (AE 6; OB 6) begins to differ from it. The difference that we call ethics catches sight of the ontological difference and even flushes it out; but in designating it, it annuls it immediately.

The passage

It remains for us to follow phenomenologically the passage from the ontological difference to the "more ancient" ethical difference. If one admits that

the ontological difference suffers from an amphibology, it is necessary to pinpoint its origin. Levinas does so without ambiguity: "the distinction between Being and beings is borne by the amphibology of the said" (AE 7; OB 6).⁹ How does the said provoke, by itself and with the help of nothing else, the ontological difference (amphibology)? Because "the said of language always says Being" (AE 119), therefore also beings. The said discloses Being, and, in this openness, it exposes themes, *noema*, significations—in brief, intentional objects. Language, like consciousness, thematizes: "*essence* is the very fact that there is a theme, exhibition, *doxa* or *logos*, and thus truth" (AE 51; OB 39). And yet, this said, how and on what grounds does it say something (to me)? It says something to me in as much as it is—thus in as much as it is by itself, equal to itself, present to and in itself, remaining in its own ground (its *ousia*), and objective for an intentional consciousness which takes possession of it, that is, an intentional consciousness which is also referred first to itself alone. Being as openness discloses only objectified beings and arouses only a consciousness intending objects. Consequently, this multiform permanence obfuscates a wholly other interrogation: "The logical supremacy of the 'what?' in the Said abolishes this difference [between 'who?' and 'what?']". The logos as said, a revelation of Being in its amphibology of Being and beings, lets the 'who?' get lost in the 'what?'" (AE 34; OB 27). In this way, the amphibology concerns not so much the elements of the ontological difference as the conditions for the emergence of the *Seinsfrage*: the relation between Being (essence, openness) and beings (intentional object, *noema*) here does not suffer from a genuine ambiguity in the sense in which for Heidegger, by contrast, the fold (*Zweifalt*) of *to on* remains, as such, the ambiguity par excellence. Here, the amphibology is displaced: it no longer concerns the emergence of the (ontological) difference from the core of the *on*, but the anterior (ethical) conditions for the arising and the privilege of the *Seinsfrage*. From internal to Being, it becomes external to it: the ontological difference comes up as first question only once an other decision is taken, an other interrogation overlooked.¹⁰

Reconstituting the interrogation forgotten by Heidegger implies going back from the said to the Saying, to the "Saying without the said" (AE 33, 58, 188; OB 26, 45, 147). No said would be admitted if it was not understood [*entendu*]; it would not be understood [*entendu*], if one did not first listen to it [*écouté*]; such a listening [*écoute*] requires in turn that I be quite willing [*mögen*] to pay attention to it, thus that I be exposed to it. In this way, the said presupposes, on the hither side of the objectivity of a theme, the Saying as a relation of the Other and an *I* disposed to being exposed, to listening to a said which, as such, does not want to admit [*entendre*] anything. The said requires the Saying which, nonetheless, it can never say: "Being and beings weigh heavily by virtue of the saying that gives them light. Nothing is more grave, more august than responsibility for the other, and saying, in which there is no play, has a gravity more grave than its own

being or not being" (AE 58; OB 46); "Saying, pure self-expression in the giving of signs to the Other (language prior to the said)" (AE 78; OB 62).¹¹ The Saying does indeed precede the said, but this foreword [*avant-dit*] says nothing more than what the said will say; it only institutes the conditions within which the said can be understood, thus listened to, thus attended to—namely, the "non-indifference to another" (AE 162; OB 48. See also AE 123; OB 96–7). More essential—less essential rather—than said ontological difference is the ethical difference: in order that Being might be able to speak to me (to claim me), I still have to admit that Being "says something to me" and that I must listen to it—the Saying, thus, is still necessary. Without the Saying, every said (even that of the Being of beings) would sound in the void of indifference. Only non-indifference to the Other can avoid indifference to the ontological difference; but, at the same time, this non-indifference marks its anteriority to the ontological difference and, consequently, abolishes it again in indifference.

The intervention of the non-indifference, as final regulatory authority, implies at least three innovations in phenomenological method. First, the parallelisms between *noema* and *noesis*, between meaning and signification, or between intention and fulfillment suffer an exception: "Saying signifies without stopping in the said" (AE 62n.34; OB 190n.34); "The signification of saying goes beyond the said" (AE 48; OB 37); "Signification precedes essence" (AE 16; OB 13). That is, before signification, before *noema*, before fulfillment, it is necessary that the Saying, thus my exposure to listening, my opening to the other, render them possible: "My responsibility for the other is the *for* of the relationship, the very signifyingness of signification, which signifies in saying before showing itself in the said" (AE 126; OB 100). Against the Husserlian parallelism, signification (as signifyingness) is imposed before and therefore without intuitive fulfillment, without *noema*, without meaning. That is, the Saying does not deploy any other signification, except for the condition of all signification, of all *noema*, of all fulfillment: the fact *that* this saying, whatever it might be, is addressed to me without possible substitution and *that* I have to respond to it, at least by silent attention. Secondly, the intentional structure loses its primacy. The Saying supposes nothing less than an "inversion of intentionality" (AE 61; OB 47), "quite the contrary of intentionality" (AE 69; OB 53), an "inversion of consciousness" (AE 128; OB 101).¹² In effect, intentionality presupposes that *I* aim, will, speak, say; thus, it is always directed towards an object, even more precedes and constitutes it, as a pole and a center. It is in this way that the said is found to depend passively on an active *I*, which, in the best of cases, literally listens to itself speaking. If the Saying becomes the condition for the possibility of the said, then, by a rigorous consequence, the *I* must experience itself passively summoned—no longer first to speak and to say, but to listen. From the moment when the *I* listens before uttering (itself) and when it thereby corresponds with the Saying instead of producing the said, it

becomes a respondent, thus is defined as responsible. Thirdly, the Saying, understood as a foreword, does not, like the said, bear on this or that being which it would unveil by saying it. For the Saying, one needs more and better than to have established evidence, since the *I* can always refuse it since it produced it; the *I* can always, before the manifestation of beings, deny the evidence: lie, trick, cheat. Therefore, the Saying requires, beyond the evidence of the object, the sincerity of the *I*. "No said equals the sincerity of the saying, is adequate to the veracity that is prior to the True, the veracity of the approach, of proximity, beyond presence. Sincerity would then be saying without the said" (AE 183; OB 143). By the "saying without the said of sincerity" (AE 190; OB 149), one must not understand the unveiling of this or that essence by an utterance, but the accomplishment of the straightforward relation between my open face and an other face—better, *to* an other face, to an other greeting me with a straight face and whom I force myself to greet in return with a straight face. Sincerity says nothing, but renders possible all reciprocal saying: the face to face that it arranges has nothing other to say than this face facing an other face. A glance exchanged (according to the Saying) and all (said) is said. By such a "de-situating of the ego" (AE 65; OB 50), such as it remains despite all the profundity of the phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger, sincerity phenomenologically destroys the terms of the ontological difference: "A fission of the ultimate substantiality of the ego, sincerity is reducible to nothing ontic, to nothing ontological and leads as it were beyond or on the hither side of everything positive, every position" (AE 183; OB 144). Exactly as, for Heidegger, anxiety leads into the ontological difference, for Levinas, sincerity is excepted from it and liberates from it.

The reduction

This conclusion, established to be sure, nevertheless does not avoid an objection: sincerity does not so much destroy the ontological difference as such—according to the articulation in it of beings with Being—as it stigmatizes a condition of its possibility that had remained hidden until then, the Saying (which others will approach under the names dia-logical, pragmatic, etc.). Being and beings do indeed lose the principial primacy that Heidegger had bestowed on them, but they remain as such intact—bypassed, not destroyed. Moreover, they reappear indirectly in order to qualify sincerity: if the latter possesses "nothing ontic," "nothing ontological," then the "nothing" still qualifies it; and the nothing belongs above all (according to Heidegger at least) to the ontological difference.

This dangerous rekindling of the *Seinsfrage* can be fought in two ways, at least. In the first place, in order to think the difference of the Saying from the said without borrowing from the *Seinsfrage* either the "nothing" or the "difference," Levinas returns to a concept that originated in phenomenology,

the reduction: "the reduction of the said to the saying . . . the reduction to signification, to the one-for-the-other of responsibility . . . the reduction to restlessness" (AE 58; OB 45). Reduction must be understood here in the strict Husserlian sense: the reconduction of the phenomenon to the effectively given. If "the movement back to the saying is the phenomenological reduction in which the indescribable is described" (AE 69; OB 53), that must mean: in virtue of the Saying, in all beings said, what is given first and unconditionally consists in the address of speech, demanding that my ears listen, thus that my face be open; the indescribable in the phenomenon (the Saying of the said) is given imprescriptibly, before all intuitive donation, in the very exigency of reception. Confronted with this reduction, Being as well as beings appear as reduced phenomena—given to be sure, but conditioned by a first donation—as founded phenomena, not founding ones. In this sense, they find in the reduction a phenomenological status, a precise though derived and regional one, which forbids them from pretending to surreptitiously reinterpret the Saying.¹³

Hence a second response. Every reduction detaches a pole to which it can assign what it recognizes as given. But, this pole must be defined as a constituting *I* only if it is a matter of constituting a given; here, where it is only a matter of receiving the Saying before the said, how is the reference pole to be defined? Levinas maintains that a "subject" is at issue—of course without understanding it as a transcendental *I*, but rather as the subject submitted to a subjection, subordinated to the call which summons it to expose itself. At the price of a complete inversion of its most current modern acceptance, the "word *I* means *here I am* [*me voici*]" answering for everything and for everyone" (AE 145; OB 114). Constitution by the *I* yields, in virtue of sincerity, to the exposure of the *I*: "the anarchic identity of the subject flushed out without being able to slip away, the ego led to sincerity, making signs to the Other . . . of this responsibility: 'here I am'" (AE 184; OB 144–5). In brief, the subject remains a subject only by subjection, in no way by domination; the nominative *I* yields to the accusative *me*: "the ego stripped by the trauma of persecution of its scornful and imperialist subjectivity, is reduced to the 'here I am [*me voici*]', in a transparency without opaqueness" (AE 186; OB 146); "'here I am [*me voici*]' . . . where the pronoun 'I' is in the accusative" (AE 180; OB 142). How is this "here I am [*me voici*]" to be understood? In the first sense, as the exposure of the *I* renouncing its mastery in order to offer a face submitted to the pure Saying—in brief, as that alone which remains after the new reduction. In the second sense, it seems legitimate to read in it an echo of the Scriptures, in particular (according to AE 186n.11; OB 199n.11) of Isaiah: 6,8: "Here I am! send me"; it could also be a question of Psalm 40: 6–7: "You want neither sacrifice nor oblation; / you have opened my ear; / you require neither burnt offering nor sacrificial victim; / so I said: 'Here I am, I come.' / In the roll of the book, it is prescribed that I do your will." This text happens also to be applied to Christ in the Epistle to the Hebrews

10: 5–10. Thus, obedience to the ethical infinite would identify, in the new phenomenological reduction, he who oversteps the ontological difference.

This result, however satisfying it might seem, nonetheless harbors an imposing difficulty. The inversion of the *I* into an “here I am [*me voici*]” is accomplished in Levinas’s work on the basis of and to the benefit of the Saying, thus of ethics; but can it not also be accomplished on the basis of and to the benefit of the ontological difference? And, for that matter, *Dasein*—insofar as its facticity, its thrownness, and its anticipatory resoluteness oppose it radically to the Husserlian *I*—could itself also be translated by *here I am*: *da-sein*, Being exposed here, Being inasmuch as exposed here [*me voici: da-sein, être exposé ici, être en tant qu’exposé ici*]. For, the ontico-ontological privilege of *Dasein* consists, without any other excellence, uniquely in its exposure, as a being deprived of all neutrality, to the putting into play of the Being of beings. *Dasein* does not receive any other privilege except to be exposed to, to put itself at play in, and to decide for the sake of the Being of beings; it can do so only by virtue of its exposedness, its being the being who is put into question in a *here* open to every gust of wind.¹⁴ Exposure thus characterizes *Dasein* as much as “here I am”; it confers on each of them a critical role (in the way that one speaks of a critical mass, a critical moment, etc.). Without a doubt, the import and the limits of this rapprochement are debatable; but, at the very least, one will be obliged to debate them—precisely because the similarity has been established too clearly for it to be neglected subsequently, with nothing else. It must therefore be received as the sign of an ever-resistant *aporia*: if the destruction of the ontological difference is indeed effected in and through a being—here I am—the unique interlocutor of the Saying and of its reduction, if is absolutely necessary to specify by which characteristics this being is distinguished from, among others, *Dasein* and is uprooted irremediably from every ontological function. So long as this confrontation is not carried as far as possible, the confusions and the temptations will still remain alive.

Being in question

The similarities between *Dasein* and *here I am* are neither unexpected (both the one and the other are defined according to the ontological difference—either in order to accede to it or to be liberated from it) nor formal (a similar sort of exposure sets them apart from all other beings). They must therefore be distinguished at the very heart of their basic similarity.

Identity in the accusative defines *here I am* according to three characteristics. First, it is not a question of a merely persistent being but of a name (AE 68; OB 52–53), which refers it to an other; or rather, it is itself received from the point of view of this other, no longer from its own: “The subject is described as a self, from the first in the accusative form, (or under accusation!)” (AE 69; OB 53); “not strictly speaking an ego set up in the

nominative in its identity, but first constrained to . . . as it were in the accusative form, from the first responsible and not able to slip away" (AE 107; OB 85). The term "decentered" is not even suitable, for no center could ever have been decentered since originally no *I* assured even the least bit of a center: "Everything is from the start in the accusative . . . the signification of the pronoun *self* [*Se*] for which our Latin grammars themselves know no nominative form" (AE 143; OB 112). The *self* discovers itself [*Le moi se découvre*] already in the accusative before having formed even the least bit of an *ego* (AE 177; OB 139).¹⁵ Second, that which imposes the accusative without nominative is my original indebtedness towards the other who silently demands that I recognize in him a right over me before or without reciprocity—and who justly does have the right to it. For, before every debt consciously incurred by me towards him, the other claims me through his face which faces mine; "the absolute accusative of the self" (AE 150n.21; OB 196n.21) can be declined as "the unlimited accusative of the persecution" (AE 151; OB 118) which I suffer, but can also reach the not easily tolerated paradox of "responsibility for the persecutor" (AE 141; OB 111). Third, in the *here I am* in the accusative, its Being is not at issue—except "under a borrowed mask" (AE 134; OB 106), as a person "clothed with purely borrowed being" (AE 135; OB 106). For responsibility takes from it the care for its own Being in the same instant as it imposes on it concern for the Being of the Other. "The subject . . . in the accusative without recourse in Being, expelled from Being, outside of Being" (AE 140; OB 110) appears as the sole being in and for which there is at issue neither its ownmost Being (understood as a *conatus in suum esse perseverandi*), nor even Being *überhaupt*, but the other than the self.

In what way do these characteristics recover those of *Dasein*? Here, one must be on guard against every peremptory and univocal response. Indisputably, *Dasein* is itself also defined by a decenteredness which right away deports it outside the *I* before its even having been experienceable as a center. In it, in effect, an other than itself is at issue: either its own Being is at issue ("*Seiendes, dem es in seinem Sein um dieses selbst geht* [A being for which in its own Being this very Being is at issue]"),¹⁶ or Being as such ("*Das Sein ist es, darum es diesem Seiendem je Selbst geht* [Being is that which is an issue for every such entity]").¹⁷ There thus arises a common trait: *Dasein* and *here I am* are not interested in themselves; they do not stubbornly persevere in their own essence, but surrender themselves, constrained or not, to an other, anterior, unconditioned instance which deprives them both equally of the privilege of denomination in the nominative, reducing them either to the accusative or to the dative. Other similarities could be highlighted: for instance, *Dasein* does indeed experience responsibility, but in order to attribute it to Being;¹⁸ also, the insubstitutability of *here I am* finds an echo in the "mineness" of *Dasein* since the latter indicates less the affirmation of itself and its property than the impossibility of being able to slip away from

its personality and its possibility of dying.¹⁹ In brief, it is a question of two originally eccentric beings, two beings originally expelled from themselves. But, in that case, the gap between them becomes only more visible: for, if *Dasein* is exposed to Being, *here I am* is exposed to the Other; inversely, *Dasein* neglects the originary access to the Other, while *here I am* accomplishes this access by passing outside Being. The similarities only establish the background from which the dissimilarity stands out all the more. The real question consists in comprehending how such an expulsion outside oneself can lead, in the end, to two so divergent analyses.

We thus arrive at a situation of indecision: the overcoming of the ontological difference does not depend so much on the simple substitution of the (accusative) *me* for the (nominative) *I*—since *Dasein* accomplishes it as well—as it does on the decidedly ethical (and not ontological) interpretation of the originary decenteredness. The question becomes the following: how can the privileged being (*here I am*, *Dasein*) be developed in such a way as to envisage the face of the other, rather than the event of Being? The response is found, at least at first, in the radical determination of *here I am* as a hostage. “The subject is a hostage” (AE 142; OB 112); “the *ipseity* . . . is a hostage” (AE 145; OB 114); “*ipseity* reduced to the irreplaceable hostage” (AE 196; OB 153); “this book interprets the *subject* as a *hostage* and the subjectivity of the subject as a substitution breaking with Being’s essence” (AE 232; OB 184). Hostage: he who, in advance and without having chosen it, depends on an other. *Dasein* can be put into play; it must, nonetheless, always decide to do so itself. Better, its being put into play is but one with “anticipatory resoluteness” (*vorlaufende Entschlossenheit*): whatever happens to *Dasein*, in principle it always wanted it. In contrast, he who says *here I am* finds himself, as a hostage, exposed to the other without having deserved or wanted it. More, whether this exposure to the other grants me a suffering, a pain, a pleasure, or a joy will depend neither on my choice nor on my responsibility: the decision is in the hands of the other, and I remain not responsible for it. Always innocent or always guilty—the two hypotheses are equivalent from the moment that, as hostage, it does not belong to *me* to decide. I do not have to decide to expose myself to the other, nor to choose this or that other, nor to begin or to suspend this exposure, nor to comport myself in it as an innocent (or as a criminal). Hostage, I do not decide anything whatsoever and above all not *to be* hostage. Ethics begins when the freedom to decide *ceases* and when the irrevocable precedes me.

Whence comes the voice which says the irrevocable? The word which summons me as its hostage, witness and stake of the other and of his fate—how does it reach me? What call does he who responds “Here I am” hear? To what does Israel listen? At least one response appears correct: before hearing [*entendre*] this or that voice, the hostage must be able to hear [*entendre*]*—to have heard how to hear and to be proficient at it [s’y entendre à entendre]*. Phenomenologically, this requirement signifies that he must first

and fundamentally be defined as a (quasi-) being susceptible of hearing [*entente*] or, if one prefers, exposed to hearing [*entente*]. As he who constitutes the capacity to be summoned: namely, the *interloqué*.²⁰ The *interloqué* alone can hear a call and knows that he must. This call, precisely because he accepts it as such, he knows how to recognize as the Saying; for, before all *Anspruch des Seins*, one must know how to recognize, admit and support a claim in general. The overcoming of the ontological difference therefore depends less on the relativization of its two terms than on the phenomenological reduction carried all the way to its final term: the reduction to the final donation, that of the Saying—indeed, more clearly still, that of a claiming call.

To admit that a claim can make a hostage of me, that is what, in general, would transgress the ontological difference. But it would establish the last difference: to surrender oneself to the claim, or not.

Notes

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- 1 [Throughout this essay, I have used the capitalized "Being" to translate the French *l'être* and "beings" to render the French *l'étant*. Because the English translations of Levinas's text do not always follow this decision, I have often modified them. I have, however, followed the English translations of Levinas in translating the French *Autrui* as "Other" with a capital O and the French *autre* as "other" with a small o.—Trans.]
- 2 *L'Idole et la Distance: Cinq études* (Paris: Grasset, 1989), pp. 278ff. This work does not hide its debt to Levinas; in a sense, even the central concept of distance could claim to come from it, if one considers "the distance that is enlarged in the measure that proximity narrows, the glory of infinity" (AE 184; OB 145).
- 3 DE, 1977, p. 12. See the note referring explicitly to *L'Idole et la Distance*. This discussion was taken up quite objectively by S. Petrosino in "D'un livre à l'autre: *Totalité et infini—Autrement qu'être*," in *Cahiers de la nuit surveillée: Emmanuel Levinas* (Lagrasse: Verdier, 1984), pp. 199ff., then by S. Petrosino and J. Rolland in their fine study, *La Vérité nomade: Introduction à Emmanuel Levinas* (Paris: La Découverte, 1984), pp. 100–2, which also brings "illeity" close to "distance" (p. 164). Concerning the ontological difference and ethics, see S. Strasser, *Jenseits von Sein und Zeit: Eine Einführung in Emmanuel Levinas Philosophie* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978), pp. 227ff., and F. P. Ciuglia, "Creazione e differenza ontologica nel pensiero di Emmanuel Levinas," *Archivio di Filosofia*, 53, (1985) pp. 3–4.
- 4 In the first rank of which I must, retrospectively, count myself. But I will beg for indulgence, claiming for myself the same relation to Emmanuel Levinas as that which Levinas himself acknowledged to Heidegger (excepting the final part of the sentence, obviously): "These lines and those that follow owe much to Heidegger. Deformed and ill-understood? At least, this deformation will not have been a way to deny the debt. Nor this debt a reason to forget" (AE 49n.28; OB 189n.28).

- 5 By supposing to be solid the conclusions of our recent study, *Réduction et donation. Recherches sur Husserl, Heidegger, et la phénoménologie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1989).
- 6 [The English version of *Otherwise than Being* has "essence" here where the French reads "essance."—Trans.]
- 7 See AE 8, 23, 30, 39, 49, 55, 58, 60 etc. (OB 7, 19, 23–4, 31, 38, 42–3, 45–6, 47, etc.) and DQVI 235, 236, etc. Compare E. Gilson, *L'être et l'essence*, 2nd ed. (Paris: J. Vrin, 1962), Introduction, pp. 12–23.
- 8 And, reciprocally, it is no longer a question of reclaiming the function of Being: "In this analysis, we do not mean to reduce a being that would be the ego to the act of substituting itself that would be the Being of this being" (AE 149 and note 20; OB 117 and 196n.20). Strictly speaking, the debate evoked in the beginning of the present essay here finds its conclusion: it is indeed *Otherwise than Being* which thinks, and disqualifies as such, the ontological difference. The response made in the second edition of *De l'existence à l'existant* is confirmed to the letter.
- 9 See AE 23, 29, 55 (OB 19, 23, 42): "The birthplace of ontology is in the said. Ontology is stated in the amphibology of Being and beings."
- 10 An objection remains possible, however: can one reduce the two terms of the ontological difference, or even just beings in all their extensions, to the "theme," to "exhibition" (AE 51; OB 39)? That is, do not "theme" and "exhibition" uniquely characterize beings (and not Being), indeed beings understood as *Vorhandenheit*? Can one include in "theme" and "exhibition" beings *zuhanden* and above all a being in the mode of *Dasein*? Such a universalization of the *Vorhandenheit* to include beings in their entirety, indeed to the Being of beings—if it is confirmed—would not strengthen but, on the contrary, seriously weaken the critique of the *Seinsfrage* on the basis of the relativization of the Said. For the ontological difference (1) is not at play between two objects but between a being, eventually an object, and a non-being, non thematizable, non objectivizable, Being, and (2) cannot be thematized as such since we neither observe nor consider it from the exterior, but "... wir bewegen uns in dieser Unterscheidung des Seinden und des Seins [...] we move within this difference between beings and Being]" (Heidegger, *Grundbegriffe, Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 51, [Frankfurt a.M.: Klostermann, 1981], p. 43; *Basic Concepts*, trans. Gary Aylesworth [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993], p. 37).
- 11 "A saying on the hither side of the amphibology of Being and beings bound, in the form of responsibility for the Other, to an irrecoverable past" (AE 60; OB 47). "Saying without the said, a sign given to the Other, a witness in which the subject quits his clandestineness as a subject" (AE 188; OB 147).
- 12 See DQVI 234, 235, and above all 241ff.: "3. *Au-delà de l'intentionnalité*." Likewise, "La conscience non-intentionnelle," in *Entre-nous: Essais sur la pensée-à-l'autre* (Paris: Grasset, 1991). Other references and discussions are found in our study of "L'Intentionnalité de l'amour," in *Cahiers de la Nuit surveillée: Emmanuel Levinas*, p. 233ff. As for Levinas's development with respect to the legitimacy of a concept of love ("Love of the neighbor, love without concupiscence" [DQVI 263; see also p. 247]), see the discussion recorded in *Autrement que savoir. Emmanuel Levinas* (Paris: Editions Osiris, 1988), pp. 74ff.
- 13 Is the term reduction still to be used when one "ventures beyond phenomenology" (AE 231; OB 183), when one deploys "a plot that is not reducible to phenomenology" (OB 46; AE 59)? Or, ought one to admit several, absolutely distinct reductions in a similarly enlarged sense of phenomenology? See a crucial text in DQVI pp. 52ff. and an attempt to assess the matter in J. Colette, "Levinas et la phénoménologie husserlienne," in *Cahiers de la Nuit Surveillée: Emmanuel Levinas*,

pp. 19–36, and in our *Prologo* to G. Gonzalez, R. Arnaiz, E. Levinas: *Humanismo y etica*, (Madrid: Editorial Cincel, 1988).

- 14 Thus, *Sein und Zeit* §55: “Durch die Erschlossenheit ist das Seiende, das wir Dasein nennen, in der Möglichkeit sein *Da* zu sein [Through disclosedness, that entity which we call ‘*Dasein*’ is in the possibility of *being* its there]” (*Sein und Zeit*, 10th ed. [Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1963], p. 270; *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson [New York: Harper and Row, 1962], p. 315); §28: “Der Ausdruck ‘*Da*’ meint diese wesenhafte Erschlossenheit. Durch sie ist dieses Seiende (das Dasein) in eins mit dem *Da*-sein von Welt für es selbst ‘*da*’ [In the expression ‘there,’ we have in view this essential disclosedness. By reason of this disclosedness, this entity (*Dasein*), together with the Being-there of the world, is ‘there’ for itself]” (*Sein und Zeit*, p. 132; *Being and Time*, p. 171). Likewise, *Über Humanismus*: “Der Mensch west so, dass er das ‘*Da*,’ das heisst die Lichtung des Seins ist [Man occurs essentially in such a way that he is the ‘there,’ that is, the lighting of Being]” (*Wegmarken, Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 9, p. 325; *Basic Writings*, trans. David Krell [New York: Harper and Row, 1977], p. 205). However, the *Letter to Jean Beaufret* clearly marks the gap between the two exposures: “*Da*-sein is a key word of my thought, and so it gives rise to serious errors of interpretation. ‘*Da*-sein’ for me does not really signify ‘here I am [*me voilà*]’ but—if I can express myself in an undoubtedly impossible French—*être-le-là* [to-be-the-there], and *le-là* [the there] is precisely *Aletheia*, disclosedness, openness” (*Questions III* [Paris: Gallimard, 1966], p. 157). The *là* becomes, in one case, the place of exposure to the face of the Other, while, in the other, it remains the very goal of the exposure, without any other reference.
- 15 The reversion from the *I* to the *melmyself*, from the nominative to the accusative, is already accomplished, explicitly and conceptually, by Pascal in opposition to Descartes. (See our discussion in *Sur le prisme méta-physique de Descartes* [Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1986], ch. V, §24, pp. 343ff.)
- 16 *Sein und Zeit*, §30, p. 141; see also §41, p. 191; §31, p. 143; etc. (*Being and Time*, pp. 180, 236, 182).
- 17 *Ibid.*, §9, p. 42; see also §5, p. 17; §12, p. 56 (*Being and Time*, pp. 67, 39, 82), and the note appearing in §4, p. 12, of the *Gesamtausgabe* edition of *Sein und Zeit*.
- 18 *Ibid.*, §29, p. 134 (*Being and Time*, p. 173), which defines Being as the “burden” which *Dasein* must bear.
- 19 The interpretation that Levinas most often gives of *Jemeinigkeit*—as perseverance in my Being and the assurance of my possession, thus as injustice—can be disputed (in this regard, see DQVI 145ff.). What belongs to *Dasein*, without negotiation or discussion, is in fact nothing more than the possibility, as my possibility, of dying, my death as absolutely non-substitutable. Nothing belongs as singularly to *Dasein* as death because it alone can assure it. *Dasein* is assured of itself only when about to die—the only good *Dasein* is a dying *Dasein*.
- 20 To pose the question otherwise, does the caller befall the called as an other, or must they be identified—“Das Dasein ist der Ruder und der Angerufene zumal [*Dasein* is at the same time both the caller and the called]” (*Sein und Zeit*, §57, p. 277; *Being and Time*, p. 322)? For a thematization of the call, see “*L’Interloqué*,” *Cahiers Confrontation* 20, (1989); “The *Interloqué*,” in *Who Comes After the Subject?*, eds. E. Cadava, et. al. (New York: Routledge, 1991), and *Réduction et donation*, ch. VI, §4–7, and “Le sujet en dernier appel,” *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* (1991), 1. D. Franck has shown recently that Levinas’s break with Heidegger derives less from a conceptual difference than from the originary decision that “Being is evil” (TA 29; TO 51) and that “one must have one’s Being pardoned” (DE 94; EE 161) in “Le corps de la différence,” *Philosophie* 34 (1992).

EMMANUEL LEVINAS

Ethics as primary meaning

Stéphane Mosès

Translated by Gabriel Motzkin

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The thought of Emmanuel Levinas stems from two distinct sources: on the one hand phenomenology, and on the other hand the Bible and the texts of the Jewish tradition. Levinas was born in Lithuania in 1905. He studied philosophy in France, and then in Freiburg, where he attended Husserl's and Heidegger's courses in 1927 and 1928. His first book, *La théorie de l'intuition dans la phénoménologie de Husserl* (1930), marked the introduction of phenomenology to France. What Levinas retained of Husserl's method above all was the focus on the concrete horizons which emerge at the background of all acts of consciousness—perceptions, emotions, and thoughts—and which 'stage' them. His study, *De l'évasion*, which appeared two years before Sartre's famous novel, provided a phenomenological description of nausea as the subject's revolt against his being stuck in the pure facticity of being-there. World War II, which Levinas endured in a French prisoner of war camp in Germany, and his discovery of Nazi horrors, may have reoriented his thinking to the absolute preeminence of ethics. Nonetheless, throughout Levinas's development, his thought remained faithful to his phenomenological inspiration. In 1947, *De l'existence à l'existant* appeared. Here Levinas—through the analysis of psychic limit-states such as fatigue, laziness and insomnia—described the condition of the human subject as a prisoner of Being's invasive, omnipresent and obsessive presence, which Levinas called "il y a" ("there is"). In contrast to Heidegger and Sartre, Levinas here characterized human existence not in terms of the anxiety of nothingness but rather of the horror of Being and its meaningless monotony. At the end of this analysis, the theme appeared which would dominate all of Levinas's subsequent work: the only way out

from the meaninglessness of "there is" is to be found in the discovery of the other in his very otherness, in the subordination of my ego to the request which the one next to me makes of me, which is the basis of ethics. To go out from oneself means to be concerned with the other. Here is Levinas's decisive break with Heidegger—not with the latter's method of phenomenological analysis, but with his vision of the world: while what defines man's reality in *Being and Time* is his concern for his own death, for Levinas what constitutes man's very humanity is the concern for the death of another.

It is only with the appearance of *Totalité et Infini* (1961) that Levinas's thought began to show itself fully. Like Franz Rosenzweig's *The Star of Redemption*, cited by Levinas in his preface as one of his main sources of inspiration, his book begins with a meditation on war, conceived as the normal condition of human beings living in a state of permanent mobilization of consciousnesses which confront each other in an incessant struggle for survival. War thus reveals the truth of Being. Taking up Hegel's analyses, Levinas considered the issue of whether the reality of war was not fated to have the last word concerning the morality of the individual. What makes the priority of morality into the central issue is not the conflict which opposes the forces of evil to those of good in man, but rather the fact that man is a part of a reality that surrounds him—that of society, politics and history, with respect to which his liberty as a subject appears as a simple illusion. Moreover, if truth is to be found in Totality, as the entire Western tradition constantly maintained, and not in its constitutive parts, the individual subject is then condemned to submit to its governing necessity (whether its provenance is in history or the *Logos*). In Levinas's thought, Totality designates the Being of traditional philosophy, conceived as the sum of all parts, or again as the correlative to Thought understood as the supreme instance of synthesis in which all knowledge is integrated.

Against this vision of Being as the immanent relation between an absolute Thought and unsurpassable Totality, Levinas opposed the ethical subject's relation to a transcendence that is outside of the system of objectifying thought. This transcendence is that of the face of the other, as he reveals himself to me in his absolute Otherness, which is to say *outside of any context*: in the ethical relation to another, my responsibility towards him is unconditional; it transcends all psychological, historical or social conditionings which could limit it. The *face* of another, a central concept in Levinas's philosophy, should not be taken in its empirical sense: it does not designate physiognomical traits. But it is also not a simple metaphor: both in physical reality and beyond it, the face signifies the Other's pure contingency, as in his weakness and morality; Levinas calls it the other's pure *exposure*, namely the silent request which he addresses to me by his mere presence. What the face reveals to me is the reality of another in his pure humanity, beyond all the social roles which he can be induced to

play. Since the essence of the encounter with another takes place in the revelation of his face, this encounter transcends the closed system of Totality in which every other relation is bonded in terms of either knowledge or power. It is this concept of the transcendence of the ethical relation which Levinas designates the *infinite*. This term is used here in the sense in which Descartes employed it in his *Meditations*, when he analyzed the paradox that man, a finite creature, is capable of thinking the idea of the infinite. For Descartes, the presence in us of the idea of the infinite could only be explained by the act of an infinite being that has placed this idea in us. What Levinas retains of this figure of thought is not the proof of the existence of God which it implies, but rather the "speculative feat" which suggests that "what remains ever exterior to thought is thought in the idea of infinity" (TI 25). What is bound together and simultaneously unraveled in this paradox is the idea that thought can contain more than it thinks, which is to say that it somehow can think an exteriority that absolutely transcends it at the same time. In this way, the otherness of another, as revealed in the ethical relation, simultaneously appears as being radically outside the objectifying aim that is realized in the system of Totality, while remaining describable within the rules of philosophical discourse. Ethics then does not constitute for Levinas a separate domain for theoretical reflection; on the contrary, the relation to another forms the primary horizon of any speculative philosophy, since any philosophy is a discourse, and there exists no discourse—even implicitly—which does not address itself to another person. From this point of view, all knowledge, including scientific knowledge, derives its possibility of being from a prior ethical attitude.

The radical otherness of another in an ethical relation means above all that this relation is not reciprocal. This is not an exchange in which the other should repay me for the good which I have supplied him. Such a reciprocity characterizes the circulation of economic exchanges, which are governed by the law of mutual benefit, but not the uniqueness of the ethical relation, where the self effaces itself in the face of the other, in a motion of generosity which is fundamentally dis-interested. Another, Levinas writes, concerns me prior to any debt which I owe him; I am responsible to him independently of any fault which I have committed with respect to him. This relation, where the obligation towards another is prior to anything I could expect from him, is basically *asymmetrical*. Levinas is opposed to Martin Buber precisely on this point (even while recognizing his own proximity to Buber's philosophy of encounter and dialogue). For Buber, the relation of the I and the Thou is reversible: the motion of the Thou towards the I corresponds to the motion of the I towards the Thou. For Levinas, on the contrary, the symmetry between the I and the Thou would once again reabsorb the otherness of the other in the identity of the Self; the radical otherness of another can only be maintained if the other appears as a term in a unidirectional relation, one in which the Self renounces its

narcissism and places itself at the service of another without expecting anything in return.

For such a relation to exteriority to be possible, however, it is necessary that the I itself first exist in all the force of its own being. *Totality and Infinity* is distinct from Levinas's subsequent writing in the emphasis it places on the Ego's specific density, characterized by such terms as *ipseity* and *separation*. In order to be able to open itself to otherness, the I must already identify itself as being outside of Totality, i.e., as being radically separated from the system of determinations which defines the individual in his historical and social context. It is in the irreplaceable unity of each individual, in his solitude as a subject transcending all the roles which he can be induced to represent, that he identifies himself as a Self. An irreducible root of any subjectivity, the Self expresses the self-sufficiency of an entity which has no need of another in order to exist. Yet this primordial autarchy is the very condition of any relation of otherness. This relation does not express any need of the Self; if it were otherwise, this relation would be essentially interested, one in which the Self would be seeking to compensate for its own deficiency, which would be the contrary of an ethical relation. An ethical relation does not consist of making use of someone but of making oneself useful to him.

This radical separation, which Levinas also calls *atheism* in *Totality and Infinity*, opens a new dimension in the analysis of otherness, that of *interiority*. The issue here concerns the various modalities of the life of the subject who, before going out of itself so as to open itself to the other's exteriority, spontaneously identifies itself to itself: the most central of these modalities of the inner life is *enjoyment*, as the satisfaction of a *need*. This need, which stimulates man to confront the world in his struggle for survival, also constitutes him as an autonomous subject. In this situation, enjoyment is the elementary expression of the happiness of being alive. Levinas shows, however, that a basic insecurity slips into the heart of this happiness and its various manifestations (joy, love of life). This insecurity is tied to the sense of the fragile nature of any enjoyment, to an anxiety about its tomorrows. Our whole relation to the future can be glimpsed through this insecurity. This relation is composed both of basic uncertainty and also of an opening to the unforeseeability of the new, an opening to its absolute exteriority. Interiority is then itself already open for the possibility of accepting a true otherness. The social dimension of this interiority which is ready to receive the Other manifests itself in the phenomenon of *dwelling*, as the place where one dwells, the place of intimacy and of possession, but also of hospitality and of giving.

The ethical relation which is initiated through the acceptance of another is, however, placed in question by the violence of death, which reduces subjectivity to silence. It then becomes necessary to show how ethics can open a specific dimension of transcendence beyond the reality of death. The last part of *Totality and Infinity* is therefore devoted to the exploration of

the modalities which lead beyond the finitude of the Self. It is in the analysis of *love* that Levinas discovers a relation to another as radical otherness: beginning with the phenomenon of Eros and its ambiguity, where the quest for otherness leads inextricably to the need for possession, and with the analysis of sensual pleasure as composed both of tenderness and profanation, Levinas then shows that the authentic revelation of otherness is produced through *fecundity* and *paternity*. This latter discloses for us a relation with "a stranger who while being another . . . is me" (TI 277). Fracturing the unity of the Self, fecundity is the very sign of transcendence:

The love of the father for the son fulfills the sole relation which is possible with the uniqueness of the other, and in this sense any love should approximate paternal love.

(TI 279)

And this is so, not only because of the fundamentally disinterested character of paternal love, but also because fecundity initiates a completely specific form of temporal experience: one in which the future is lived, not as an eternal return of the Same, but as an opening to ever-new beginnings. Each new birth in the succession of generations gives a new chance for that which the past has not succeeded in accomplishing. Thus history no longer appears as an infinitely extendible line, but as a discontinuous process, in which the break which divides the generations interrupts determinism and provides a new possibility for ethics again and again. This discontinuous time, composed of death and resurrection, is for Levinas the true Messianic time.

The appearance of this category at the end of the work—like that of the notion of "eschatology" at its beginning—and the reference at certain strategic locations in the book to the idea of God, raises the question of the status of religion in *Totality and Infinity*, and more specifically that of the place of Jewish religious themes in this philosophy. The idea of God, which appears for the first time with reference to Descartes, is, at least in this work, synonymous with the idea of the Infinite. God signifies here the absolutely Other, the ultimate exteriority that transcends Totality. In this sense, the horizon on which Levinas's thought unfolds, in opposition to the philosophy of Totality, is indeed a religious horizon. The appearance of another in his otherness perhaps suggests "the very presence of God," as Levinas writes in the conclusion of *Totality and Infinity*. "This relation to another," Levinas says in a recent text,

is so extraordinary in the natural order of things . . . that it can lead us back to the problem of Revelation in the religious sense of the term. I do not identify the two, but I say that this brings me closer to the possibility of giving a sense to Revelation.¹

The attentive reader of *Totality and Infinity* cannot refrain from remarking that certain of this work's most central themes refer—sometimes explicitly, but usually implicitly—to the Bible and to its interpretation in the Rabbinical tradition: the definition of the other as the poor man and the stranger; the emphasis placed on justice as the fulfillment of the ethical relation; the phenomenology of dwelling as the place of the feminine; the theme of paternity and filiation as structuring another modality of time and history; the idea of the prophetic eschatology which, in opposition to the threat of war implicit in the Western philosophical tradition, sees in the ethical relation of the Self towards the other the basis for peace. All these clearly refer the whole of this philosophy to its Biblical background. However, Levinas's analyses never claim the authority of the sacred text; they derive their perspicacity from their philosophical force alone. For Levinas, the Biblical sources and philosophical reflection constitute two separate orders; "what comes from the Bible can only be evoked as an illustration."² However, if the rules of philosophical discourse require that the Biblical teachings never be used as proofs or guarantees of evidence, these teachings nevertheless serve, no less than the Western metaphysical tradition, as a source of inspiration for philosophical thought. For Levinas, the epistemological status of the Bible is no different from that of Greek philosophy: these are two distinct "spiritualities" that express two modalities of the human, each as primordial as the other, Greek philosophy placing its emphasis on the ideal of knowledge, Biblical tradition on social and dialogical closeness. Philosophical reflection, which is always nourished by what has been previously thought, is free to draw its inspiration from the one or the other of these two traditions, or from both at the same time, on condition of rediscovering their premises, of rethinking them, or of extending them in its own speculative endeavor.

After *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas's philosophy developed in the direction of an ever-more radical rupture with traditional ontology, and of a progressive elaboration of categories external to the system of thought identified with the knowledge of Being. Hence his fundamental criticism of the idea that philosophy's task is exhausted in the search for knowledge, where thought assimilates the world, mastering and dominating it—in the manner in which a hand grasps an object—without wondering whether cognitive thought does not presuppose, prior to any act of constitution of knowledge, another thought, that of the Infinite, wherein man's humanity would be primordially attested. This critique of thought as knowledge implies placing in question the primary character of certain Classical notions such as the idea of the thematizing consciousness or the idea of re-presentation, in which the real is given as a presence already proffered to man's grasp.

Thirteen years after *Totality and Infinity*, *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* sought to expose another manner of philosophizing, based on

the absolute apriority in man of an ethical requirement which attests the presence in us of the idea of the infinite. Against the being that fills all the space of thought and that even fills the still-subsisting intervals of nothingness which any metaphysics leaves—against the “*esse*” (Being) that appears as “*inter-esse*” (Interest)—Levinas opposed the “Dis-interest” by means of which subjectivity withdraws from the concern of seizing the real so as to understand and dominate it. This dis-interest expresses the priority for man of another concern, that of the “for-another,” which is located beyond the principle of the persistence of Being which dominates ontology. This other dimension of thought that then opens up signifies an extreme radicalization of the themes which had been developed in *Totality and Infinity*, in particular with respect to the two central notions of *subjectivity* and *otherness*.

In *Totality and Infinity*, the Self had still been defined as an essence which posits itself and which identifies itself in the enjoyment of the world. The opening towards the other had then been presented as the rupture of this primordial Egoism. In *Otherwise Than Being*, subjectivity is no longer described in the terms of positivity; it is not an essence which exists in itself and for itself prior to turning towards another. Primordially, before any definition of the self by the self, subjectivity appears as a response to another, as engaged by the other’s request, as subjected to his call. This *a priori* responsibility for the other—which, for Levinas, is of the order of primordial *sensibility*—defines subjectivity as pure exposure to another’s silent request. This passivity (which should not be understood as a psychological attitude, but as a category, as subjectivity’s manner of being) is also expressed, for Levinas, in terms of *vulnerability* to another, of the trauma which his mere presence inflicts on the identity of the Self. Through this primordial sensibility to the next person, his fate is more important to me than my own. As a consequence of this fact, I am primarily requested to “put myself in his place”; I become in some sense his *hostage*; from this perspective, the Self sheds its identity and in a certain sense substitutes itself for the other. In a paradoxical reversion, it is through this *substitution* that the Self will henceforth be defined; being myself is being for another.

In *Otherwise Than Being*, the desubstantiation of the other corresponds to this desubstantiation of the Self. There is a fundamental paradox in the idea of the other as it appears in *Totality and Infinity*: if the face of another is defined as radical otherness, absolute exteriority with respect to the system of perception where the other is always led back to the Same, the sole fact of his appearance reintegrates him nonetheless in the horizon of the intentional consciousness, and thereby annuls his otherness. Thus his absence is always threatened with the restoration to presence, to the lack of differentiation of an object of perception. Unless otherness could be defined as pure absence: what makes another into *an other* would then be precisely the impossibility of reducing his transcendence, that vertiginous withdrawal of that which cannot be expressed in terms of presence. Prompted by the grammatical

logic of personal pronouns, whereby the third person (He/She, *Il/Elle*) always designates the one who is not there, Levinas calls this absolute absence which is constitutive of otherness *illeity* (from the Latin "*Ille*"). One can only refer to *illeity*, to that which is always absent, in the past. In this sense, the otherness of the other is revealed to us only as something which has already passed away, as a *trace*. The *trace of the other* is what remains of him for us in his absence: an absence which nothing can recapture because it refers back to what is beyond the face, to an absolute exteriority. The trace, Levinas says, is not the effect of a cause (as smoke is the effect of fire), but a quite peculiar sign, because it refers to no positive signification but rather exclusively to absence:

The trace of the other is then a completely different trace from that which concerns Sherlock Holmes. What does Holmes do? He investigates, he deduces, he reconstructs what has happened. But when everything is deducible, there is no Other. Holmes lives in a world in which there are no humans, no next ones.³

In its most absolute sense, for Levinas, the trace of the Other alludes to the trace of God, who is never there. Here, as in the famous passage of chapter 33 of Exodus, God is only revealed through his trace. From this point of view, the absolute otherness of another, conceived as absence, would correspond to the trace of God in man.

The theme of the trace of the Other raises one of the most central problems of Levinas's philosophy, which is characterized by an evermore radical transcending of all traditional discourse conceived as the discourse of Being, i.e., a closed system which absorbs the otherness of the other into its logic. In this sense, the intention which animates Levinas's philosophy is even more radical than Heidegger's: for Levinas, the issue is not just that of catching sight of a region of being that lies concealed beyond all entities, but of transcending Heidegger's Being itself, which then also is exposed as dependent—in the very heart of the "ontological difference"—on a logic of knowledge, i.e., of Totality. But is not the idea of an absolute exteriority a paradox? As Jacques Derrida already remarked in his study of 1964,⁴ when the idea of absolute exteriority becomes the theme of philosophical discourse, it is *ipso facto* absorbed by the logic of identity which governs this discourse. One cannot *speak* of transcendence without reducing it to immanence at the same time. The question is then raised of whether the Biblical tradition, in which the idea of the Infinite originates, can be integrated into philosophical reflection without appearing at the same time as one modality among others of the Western philosophical tradition.

Levinas's philosophy is, in effect, a thinking of the limit, which never ceases to refer to what is beyond the discourse of identity even while making it into a theme of its own discourse. This paradox becomes one of the

central themes of *Otherwise Than Being*, in the form of an analysis of the ambiguity of the discourse of exteriority. In any discourse, Levinas distinguishes between the "said" (*le dit*), i.e., the philosophical assertion itself, and the "saying" (*le dire*), which denotes the act of language by which this assertion is pronounced. As "said," as a theme of discourse, exteriority can only be recovered, i.e., denied, through the rules which are immanent to philosophical reason, which always have the last word from this perspective. But as "saying," exteriority can somehow reveal or *produce* itself, as an effect of discourse, through an incessant motion of hyperbole, where every "said" is immediately placed in question (*dé-dit*) by a saying which denies it every pretension of appearing as "the last word." Because this motion of saying and gainsaying is inevitably transformed in its turn into a "said" as soon as it is thematized in philosophical discourse, what Levinas calls a "blinking" (*clignotement*) of sense occurs, an incessant coming-and-going on the limit which constitutes any rational discourse. The idea of "illeity," like that of the trace, manifests this "blinking." But at the heart of this very ambiguity, the transcending of the "said" by the "saying," through which the activity of exteriority is produced, appears as the very original datum: in essence, philosophical discourse is not a monologue; it presupposes, before any thematization, the concern inherent in going towards another and addressing oneself to him: "All thought," says Levinas, "resides on the lips, and is already carried by discourse towards the other."⁵ The otherness of the other, as the original horizon of all thought, always transcends the closure of philosophical discourse.

From another angle, *Otherwise Than Being* introduces a new dimension into Levinas's philosophy in comparison to *Totality and Infinity*, namely a reflection on the status of objectivity within a thought of otherness. Otherness does not lie *alongside* objectivity, as it does for Buber, as if the objectivity of the instrumental rationality of science and technology, of society and of its institutions, should be separated from the primordial requirements of ethics. Hence the appearance of a new concept in *Otherwise Than Being*, that of the *third*. The third, who is the person next to the next, the third person, opens up the dimension of judgment and its universality in the field of ethics. My responsibility is engaged towards him as towards any other man. The inevitable question which then arises is: to whom am I closest? How can I concern myself with someone without wronging another? Here the necessity of comparing and judging arises, which is, on the other hand, the origin of the recourse to the notion of a universal reason based on the principle of objective equity. But does not such a notion of equity inevitably conflict with pure goodness, which proceeds to the other beyond any conditions which determine him? Another no longer appears to me as the unique person presenting himself for my responsibility, but as the individual who is a member of a social body, the citizen of a state governed by laws equal for all. In this contradiction, says Levinas, ethics as original goodness

"is always in danger of being extinguished in the system of universal laws which it nonetheless requires and supports."⁶ However, even in the objectivity of social and political reality, there exists "the eventual possibility of goodness making itself understood in the guise of a prophetic voice which resounds imperiously below the depths of established laws."⁷ It is then not necessary to comprehend the ethics of otherness as a pragmatic recipe which seeks to take the place of the objectivity of laws and institutions, but rather as the primary source of any humanity, whence politics and society draw their original inspiration, and which always keeps proclaiming its absolute requirements, even against the impersonal rigidity of the laws of the City.

It is this always prophetic quality of an ethics inspired by the Bible that Levinas places at the center of another part of his work, dedicated not to philosophical reflection, but rather to the commentary on texts belonging to the Rabbinical tradition. The *Quatres lectures talmudiques* (1968) followed by *Du sacré au saint* (1977) and *L'au-delà du verset* (1982) sketch a trajectory inverse to that of the properly philosophical writings: they begin with the Biblical and Talmudic sources so as to illuminate them—using an exegetical method inspired both by traditional Rabbinical hermeneutics and by phenomenological analysis—with a philosophical enlightenment with universal resonances. The theology and the anthropology which underlie these readings derive from the doctrinal tradition of the grand masters of Lithuanian Judaism, especially Hayyim of Volozhin, to whom Levinas devoted one of the essays in *L'au-delà du verset*.

In a recent interview,⁸ Levinas specified his attitude towards religious belief and more specifically towards the question of the existence of God. For him, the critique of religion formulated by Nietzsche still forms the horizon of our thought: the idea of religion as shelter or as consolation has been unmasked, once and for all, as an illusion which men created in order to be able to bear the tragedy of life. Furthermore, the horrors of the twentieth century, culminating in the extermination of the Jews, have cruelly confirmed the Nietzschean thesis: we can no longer believe today in a protecting and saving God, who extends his beneficence to those who believe in him. If it is still possible to speak of God, it is not a God "who guarantees us a happy end." For Levinas, such an idea of God is no longer tenable for us: "Nietzsche's God, the God who is dead, is the one who committed suicide at Auschwitz."⁹ Yet there is another conception of religion, which Judaism has always placed at the fore: one should not await God's bestowing his good deeds on us, but on the contrary one should love him without the expectation of reciprocity: in this sense the true love of God is the love of the next. Recognizing "the God who appears in the face of the other," this is the true protest against Auschwitz.¹⁰ The fact that another has a meaning for me, this is "the miracle of miracles," the secret of a goodness which does not expect a reward, of a "devotion without promise."¹¹

Notes

- 1 *Autrement que Savoir*. Emmanuel Levinas (Paris: Editions Osiris, 1988), p. 80.
- 2 Emmanuel Levinas, "Antlitz und erste Gewalt: Ein Gespräch über Phänomenologie und Ethik," in *Spuren in Kunst und Gesellschaft* 20 (September 1987), p. 29.
- 3 Levinas, "Antlitz und erste Gewalt," p. 33.
- 4 Jacques Derrida, "Violence et Métaphysique: Essai sur la pensée d'Emmanuel Lévinas," in *L'Ecriture et la Différence* (Paris: Seuil, 1967). English translation by A. Bass as "Violence and Metaphysics: Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas," in *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978).
- 5 *Autrement que Savoir*, p. 69.
- 6 "Entretien avec Emmanuel Levinas," in *Répondre d'autrui*. Emmanuel Levinas, ed., Jean-Christophe Aeschlimann (Neuchâtel: A la Baconnière, 1989), p. 11.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Levinas, "Antlitz und erste Gewalt."
- 9 Ibid., pp. 31, 34.
- 10 Ibid., pp. 31–32.
- 11 Ibid., p. 34.

LEVINAS' METHOD

Adriaan Peperzak

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In a response to questions asked during a discussion in March 1975,¹ Emmanuel Levinas said the following about the fascination with methodological problems that has captivated many philosophers of our century:

I do not believe that transparency is possible in method or that philosophy is possible in the manner of transparency. Those who have dedicated their entire lives to methodology have written many books instead of the more interesting books they could have written.²

Yet, clearly no philosopher operates without a method, and at least some methodological awareness is required for a non-naïve and justified theory. Aided by explicit hints and remarks found in Levinas' work,³ I will here try to sketch some aspects of the method operative in his philosophical writings.

Philosophy and Judaism

Because several commentators have accused Levinas of presenting a religious or a theological view under the name of philosophy, I must begin by briefly delineating the domain of the latter, as Levinas understands it, and indicate why his philosophical works, which he carefully distinguishes from his religious, exegetic, and theological publications, are indeed philosophical in the most rigorous sense of the word.⁴

The post-Hegelian history of philosophizing has made it obvious that the modern presupposition of a presuppositionless philosophy neither describes any existing philosophy nor is capable of generating any interesting discourse on interesting questions of human existence.⁵ Philosophy is always and necessarily rooted in and driven by a prephilosophical orientation, trust, commitment, or conviction. For the Jew Levinas, this trust and conviction

has taken shape in an orthodox Jewish lifestyle, while it finds a reasoned formulation in the Talmudic interpretation of the Bible. Inevitably, participation in this tradition plays a role—at least in the background—in his philosophy. But just as a Jewish chemist is not necessarily Jewish in his chemistry, so a philosopher obeys professional rules and standards that are neither Jewish nor Buddhist, neither atheist nor antireligious.

The rules and standards that Levinas follows in his philosophical writings are those of a transformed phenomenology, which is of course a particular form of thinking and philosophy. Husserl and Heidegger, and to some extent Bergson, were the masters from whom Levinas learned the *métier*; but in developing his own thought, he discovered that their presuppositions and methods had to be transcended and transformed.⁶ This transformation follows from philosophical complications, and its necessity can be tested by all people who are at home in the philosophical tradition—a tradition that in principle is open to all humans who are mature enough to have had certain experiences and who have learned the skills required for thinking rigorously about common experiences. Philosophy speaks a universal language, even if this language was discovered or invented in Greece (just as the language of chemistry was discovered in modern Europe, but in principle is open to all people).

However, if it is true that human lives are oriented and—at least to some extent—are ruled by prephilosophical convictions, philosophy, being the most fundamental or radical of all theoretical endeavors, cannot but *also* reflect on those convictions and orientations. As universal theory, philosophy reflects upon all forms of basic trust, be they explicitly religious or not, asking to what extent they are understandable, reasonable, rational, demonstrable, congruent, or identical with philosophically justifiable theses. For such an investigation, familiarity with the investigated conviction or commitment is a condition. It is therefore understandable that, for example, a Greek like Plato would turn to his own religious background in asking the ultimate questions about life and destiny, while a Christian who happens to be a philosopher is more inclined to interrogate Christianity, and a Jew, the Jewish tradition. In the same way that Heidegger turned to the poems of Hölderlin, in whom he saw the greatest prophet of postmodernity, Levinas quotes texts of Isaiah, Ezekiel, Matthew, the Talmud, and Dostoyevski—not to claim that these authors are authorities on philosophy, but to show that parts or elements of their wisdom can be philosophically justified. Perhaps they were the ones who awakened Levinas to the insights he later demonstrated by philosophical means—but since when has such a procedure been called unphilosophical or even unscientific? Is it unscientific to start with hypotheses? If certain parts of Levinas' philosophical work can be read as interpretations of the Bible, this shows that at least some biblical authors also have thought. To regard the coincidence between philosophical truths and some statements of a religion, as an indication of bad philosophy, only

shows how biased the contender is. But those who see the coincidence as a *philosophical* recommendation make the opposite mistake.

Continental Philosophy

Educated in Russian and French and having become a Parisian, Levinas belongs to what has been called "continental philosophy" to distinguish it from a type of Austrian, British, and American philosophy that for almost a century has prevailed in English-speaking countries. The name "continental philosophy" is neither illuminating, nor exact. Not only does "analytic philosophy"—which itself bears an ambiguous name—prevail in the Scandinavian countries and have sources and adepts in other parts of the European continent, but the great variety of styles and schools in non-analytic philosophy makes any all-encompassing title useless. One could try to gather all "continental" philosophers by characterizing them as a) convinced that modernity (i.e., the conception of philosophy prevailing from Hobbes and Descartes to Hegel, Kant perhaps excluded) is over, and as b) anti-scientific, but on the one hand, there would be several exceptions for "a," and on the other hand, the "*sciences humaines*" (psychology, psychoanalysis, sociology, ethnology, history, linguistics, literary criticism, etc.) are very present in the philosophical debate, especially in France and Italy. We might narrow "b" to the natural sciences and propose antinaturalism as a common denominator for continental philosophy, but such a characteristic would be negative only, leaving the question open as to what keeps continental philosophers together. Perhaps a consideration of the historical allegiances of continental and Anglo-Saxon philosophy would make their differences more understandable, but I cannot pursue this route here.

To concentrate on Levinas, he is certainly not close to Marx, Habermas, Bataille, Foucault, or Deleuze. The family to which he belongs can be called "phenomenological" in a broad sense—Bergson, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Ricoeur are close—but he is also at home in the classical metaphysics from Plato to Nietzsche and in the thought of Franz Rosenzweig, whose work can hardly be linked with any of the philosophical schools. I will try to show that Levinas is too original to be seen as just one of the phenomenologists by briefly—too briefly—explaining how phenomenological, Heideggerian, hermeneutical, and metaphysical elements have been integrated into his thought.

Phenomenology

It is well-known that "intentionality" is the fundamental and central notion of Husserlian phenomenology. Though undergoing several transformations, it has remained central and fundamental in all the versions of phenomenology practiced by such original followers as Heidegger, Sartre,

Merleau-Ponty, and Ricoeur. As we will see, Levinas' thought moves beyond the principle of intentionality towards something prior, something he calls "pre-original" and transcendent. Yet, Levinas claims that "despite everything, what I am doing is phenomenology, even if there is no reduction according to the rules set by Husserl, even if the whole Husserlian methodology is not respected". (DVI, 140).

"Intentional analysis," i.e., the descriptive analysis of the correlation that links a phenomenon with the consciousness without which it could not appear is the core of Husserl's method. Truth is found in complete descriptions of the modes in which human consciousness is "fulfilled" by a particular phenomenon—or to formulate the same from the other side—in descriptions of the *intentum* (or *noema*) that show how this *intentum* "fills" the perceiver's, thinker's, doer's, or feeler's *intentio* (or *noesis*). Experience as the unity of *noema* and *noesis*, the presence of the given, consciousness, assimilation, and comprehension are basic. To describe a phenomenon, it does not suffice to stare at it or at our perception of it; we must also show—in a very concrete, nonspeculative and nondeductive way—how that phenomenon is essentially caught in specific contexts, horizons, circumstances, connections with other phenomena or phenomenal elements, etc. Description yields, then, a phenomenal constellation with many possible variations in which the nonsubjectivistic "meaning" (*Sinn*) of the studied phenomenon unfolds.

The main characteristic [of phenomenology], which determines even [the work of] those who no longer call themselves phenomenologists today, lies in the fact that, by returning from what is thought to the fullness of the thinking itself, one discovers time and again new dimensions, without finding deductive or dialectical or other implications.⁷ It is this analysis which, aside from Husserl's own methodology, has been accepted by all. Starting from a theme, I approach the "manners" through which one approaches it. The manner of approach is essential for the sense of that very theme: it reveals an entire landscape of forgotten horizons, thanks to which the phenomenon that shows up has a meaning different from the meaning it had when it was considered in a straightforward look at it. Phenomenology is not an attempt to turn phenomena into things-in-themselves; it [reduces or] brings the *things-in-themselves* back to the horizon of their appearance, of their phenomenality; it makes their very appearing appear behind their appearing whatness, even if this appearing does not imprint its modalities on the meaning it delivers to the perception.

(DVI, 140)

The example of phenomenological description most admired by Levinas is, without a doubt, Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*, but the difference in Levinas'

perspective shows up in the divergence of his selection and redescription of basic phenomena. Levinas' first magnum opus, *Totality and Infinity* (1961), can be interpreted as a critical reading of the project that is partly achieved in *Being and Time*. Staying as close as possible to the skin of reality, he demonstrates, for example, how eating and drinking—forgotten or despised in Heidegger's world—are constitutive of the vital enjoyment of living in an elementary universe of earth, air, light, and water.⁸ Dwelling, being at home in a house, shows a very different aspect from Heidegger's descriptions in his essay "Building, Dwelling, Thinking."⁹ Above all, the other person (*autrui*), hidden behind Heidegger's *Miteinandersein*, is discovered as radically different from all other phenomena. The face that faces me and speaks to me is not an object, a being-with (*Mitsein*), a mirror, a repetition, or an image of myself. The other who addresses me does not resemble me, but is other than me. All attempts to "constitute" or reconstruct the phenomenality of the other as an *alter ego* fail because they ignore the basic experience of the other's visage as addressing me. Here the difference precedes the discovery of our similarity and essential equality.

The description of "the face" and its conditions of "appearance" in *Totality and Infinity* reveal a dimension that does not fit into the pattern that is taken for granted by phenomenology and traditional Hegelian or Heideggerian ontology. With an allusion to Plato's ideas and the Good, the dimension of the other can be symbolized through the word "height": "highness" or "height" (*hauteur*) is a characteristic; the other "comes from on high."¹⁰ Other metaphors are used in characterizing the other as a stranger, as naked (not clothed in the cultural paraphernalia that make us similar), as destitute or marginal, as an orphan or widow, and as a hole or gap in the universe of beings. But all of these qualifications are negative. The only way to express the impact made by the other in positive terms is to use ethical language: the other reveals a command; to address me (in looking at or speaking to me) *is* to reveal my being-for-the-other in the sense of serving, respecting, and honoring the other's "height." As other—not through any deed or wish or will—the other deserves my devotion or dedication to or responsibility for him or her, including his or her actions, wishes, and will. The ethical aspect of the encounter is constitutive of the other's coming to the fore. Using traditional language, we must say that the answer to the question "what *is* the other?" can only be "the other *obliges* me." The other's being reveals itself as an order. Here a kind of ought is the only possible correlate of the manifestation of this "being." My obligation to serve the other coincides with my being what I am as revealed by the other's presence before me.

The radical difference between *autrui* and me separates us; it constitutes a "relation without relation" or a "metaphysical relation." The word "metaphysical" must be heard here as referring to a dimension beyond *physis*, in the sense in which Heidegger explains Aristotle's concept of *physis* in

Physics B1,¹¹ viz., as a synonym for being. "Metaphysics," as it is used in *Totality and Infinity* to name Levinas' own position, means, then, a thought beyond (the Heideggerian interpretation of) ontology.

According to Levinas, his "metaphysics" is a thinking beyond phenomenology and ontology. The reason for this statement lies in a fundamental decision. After discovering the irreducible otherness of the human other, Levinas concluded that "phenomenon" and "phenomenology" have been wrongly understood as covering a homogeneous universe of beings and a universal method for approaching all kinds of fundamentally similar phenomenality. This conclusion could have led him to the Aristotelian thesis that "phenomenon," along with "being" (which in phenomenology is synonymous with phenomenality), "is said in many [generically different, or 'analogous'] ways" (see *infra*, note 14). In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas still wavers on this point: despite his criticisms of Heidegger's ontology, he employs ontological notions, such as being "*καθ' αὐτό*" and "the truth of being" or "to be in truth" in order to name that beyond.¹² Later, however, he abandoned all attempts to present alterity within the framework of an ontology. Instead of focusing on the analogy of being, which then seems to him to obscure the abyssal difference between the other's facing me and all other modes of existence, he firmly states that the language of phenomenology and ontology is not appropriate to evoke the quasi-phenomena that are "other" in the emphatic sense unconcealed by him. This decision forced him to invent a post- or transphenomenological terminology for what can no longer be captured as a being or phenomenon. The other is not a phenomenon, but is instead an "enigma"; the other's emergence is not a manifestation or monstration, but an "epiphany," a "revelation," or a "visitation." By rejecting the absolute universality and ultimacy of being, which is always somehow phenomenal, Levinas' metaphysics became a retrieval of the Platonic and Neoplatonic tradition of "the Good beyond being,"¹³ which gives his thought a sublime aspect. However, the rejection of a more Aristotelian conception of the generic differences between modes of being and manifestation or revelation has made Levinas' task very difficult, not only with regard to *autrui* who faces me, but also in relation to other topics linked to it, such as the irreducible alterity of God, me, death, freedom, teaching, time, procreation, education, and so on. If all these cannot be thematized in an ontological framework, philosophical language becomes almost, if not wholly, impossible.

That the alterity of the human other implies other alterities can be shown by reflecting on the position of the ego who meets with the other. The main part of *Otherwise than Being* is devoted to the analysis of *me* as touched and obligated by the other. The focus is shifted to the enigmatic structure of the ego, whose freedom, much celebrated in modern philosophy, is preceded by a non-chosen responsibility for the other, from which I cannot escape. Before being an autonomous and self-sure actor or thinker, I am the "me"

of a "*me voici*" of which I become aware when another confronts me. This awakening leads me to discover that I am guilty, insofar as my self-concern withholds me from devotion to the other. I discover myself called to perform an infinite task and deficient in fulfilling it. Levinas deepens this experience by showing that I am the hostage and substitute of the other and that the infinite is "in me" causing a strange kind of nonidentity between me and myself. Against the primacy of freedom, upheld by modern philosophy, he insists on the alterity of my own responsibility from which I cannot escape.

To return to the question of metaphysics versus ontology, Levinas' rejection of the latter as an adequate framework for thinking about the other necessitates the development of a heterology in which phenomena and being are no longer the most basic notions. But how is this possible? He has shown how phenomenality and being are intimately connected with experience, self-consciousness, representation, comprehension, presence, identification, manifestation, monstration, assimilation, knowledge, immanence, teleology, and so on. If we must avoid the entire network of those notions in speaking about the most important and interesting questions, how will we be able to treat them at all? Do we not need another experiential and conceptual framework for thinking about the non-phenomenological and non-ontological topics and themes that have emerged? Levinas answers that the other, I myself, death, God, and so on are not topics or themes, because they disrupt and refute the very idea of topicality or thematizability. Someone who speaks to me disappears as soon as I reduce her to the status of a theme or topic. I no longer see her looking at me or hear her appeal when I thematize her as an interesting object. According to Levinas, thematization as such obscures and distorts all otherness. If philosophy essentially *is* thematization, the most important questions fall outside its scope. The price for the discovery of alterity is high, but its lesson is important: as incorrigibly thematizing, philosophy is not capable of grasping the full truth, but it makes philosophers aware of a constitutive reference to a beyond that transcends their comprehension. Once this beyond has convinced them of its irreducibility, their perspective on all thematizable phenomena also changes. In light of that beyond, these phenomena, too, look different. The reference of all beings to the otherness of their beyond is co-constitutive of their essences.

Personally, I prefer another decision than the one made by Levinas. His marvelous descriptions of the other's facing, speaking, addressing, and appealing can be accepted as a discovery about the multiple senses in which being is phenomenal. Phenomenality is "said in many ways" (λέγεται πολλαχῶς).¹⁴ The radicality of the difference between true alterity and all kinds of similarities and identities must be maintained, however, by overcoming the univocity of being in a phenomenology of being's "analogy." This route would make it possible to discover other "faces" or quasi-faces

and "speeches" or quasi-speeches among the phenomena that surprise us in the universe, without erasing the irreducible differences.

Ontology

Levinas' opposing of metaphysics to ontology should not be understood as a rejection of *all* ontology, but rather as its dethronement. By subordinating phenomenality and being to the "metaphysical relation" between the other and me, Levinas reopened the question of the meaning of those notions. His answer can be found in several attempts at writing a phenomenological ontology of his own.

These attempts are not guided by an experience of being as generously giving, as Heidegger suggests in his meditations on the meaning of *Es gibt*, but rather by its anonymous character lacking any appeal or goodness. As "*il y a*," being presents the most primitive aspect of an indeterminate and inordinate "rumbling" that precedes all qualifications, a chaos before order and determinacy, which underlies the world of spontaneous enjoyment and culture.¹⁵ In *Otherwise than Being*, a new, less restricted ontology is proposed when Levinas describes being, *esse*, *essence*, or *essance* (to be heard in its active and transitive voice) as an all-pervasive interestedness. *Esse* is *interesse*. Being is being interested in maintaining and developing itself, the maintenance of a *maintenant*, the self-interested handling of a presence in the continuing present of one's own essence, not allowing disturbances or interruptions or swallowing these as soon as they threaten the ongoing flow of this basic "*inter-essence*." Levinas borrows from Spinoza the expression *conatus essendi* to summarize his own ontology, which is at the same time a reinterpretation of Heidegger's Being, whose all-connecting and totalitarian character is emphasized and accepted.¹⁶

Levinas' opposition of his own thought to "ontology" must not be understood as a total rejection of that discipline. He proposes his own ontology as a subordinate level of thought, but insists that no ontology can be the all-encompassing, ultimate, or fundamental part or whole of philosophy, because God, the other, and I do not fit in its space and time. If "being" is linked to homogeneity, universality, and totality, it cannot be first and last. Must we say that it cannot be the first and last *horizon*? That would presuppose that truth always has a horizon; but what if the absolute necessity of a horizon, as a presupposition tied to the ontological and phenomenological tradition, is refuted by the revelation of the other's face and speech? The other disrupts and pierces that very idea of a horizon; she transcends all contexts and cannot be reduced to the existence of a being. And yet, we cannot avoid using the copula in talking about the other while saying that she exists. This *aporia* created a certain wavering in *Totality and Infinity* but was later resolved by the thesis that the language of ontology is an effect of the thematizing character of philosophical theory, whereas an exchange in which

you and I address one another does not reduce us to beings, but leaves us outside the horizon of everything that can be described as a moment of a totality within a common horizon.

Levinas' critique of a totalitarian ontologism brings him close to the Greek tradition of apophatic theology of Plotinus, Proclus, and Dionysius. How is Levinas then able to talk at all about that which "evades"¹⁷ the horizon of being, except by means of negations and denials? Could we understand his "alterology" as a modern or postmodern version of the Neoplatonic approach to the One? A certain affinity with this powerful current of Western metaphysics cannot be denied. Its clearest expression is found in Levinas' insistence on the necessity of "unsaying" (*dédire*) all that is said in a thematic idiom (*le dit*). Thematization as such (*le dire* in the sense of objectifying or thetic discourse) distorts the other, me, God, death, liberty, and so on, and this distortion cannot be fully repaired. However, Levinas rejects the identification of his own heterology with any kind of negative theology,¹⁸ although he affirms that the main concern of *Otherwise than Being* is "to perceive a God who has not become spoiled by being" (*AE*, x).

The first distinction between Levinas' philosophy and Neoplatonism lies in the fact that the *human* other occupies the center of his thought, while the blinding light of the One overshadows all other otherness on the Platonic scene. According to Levinas, God is not given directly in any way, but is referred to by his trace which I encounter in the Other.¹⁹ To a certain extent, the human other has taken the place of the God of classical metaphysics: it is the human other who is now infinite, absolute, an enigma, alien to the economy of a phenomenal world, etc. Yet, it would not be correct to say that Levinas simply transposes the idea of the infinite from the dimension of the divine to the domain of sociality or intersubjectivity, because he does not treat the other as a thematizable object or theme at all. Characterization of the absolute through negative attributes does not necessarily change its objective, thematic, or thematizable status. Negative theology does not recognize that *theoria* as such is inadequate to the "reality" of what it *desires* to approach. The desideratum evades all predication. If we cannot stop talking *about* it (instead of listening or taking *to* it), we must understand and show to what extent and why statements (*le dit*) of such a talking (*dire*) are essentially and irreparably defective.

The third reason why Levinas does not want to be associated with apophatic theology lies in the fact that a critique of ontology is not enough to indicate the direction in which the otherness of the other engages our search. Instead of negations, we need *positive* qualifications to explore the dimension of the absolute, the infinite, and the Good. The attempt of negative theology to stare at God in an always deferred theoretical search does not lead to a real attachment, while the command through which the other's visage makes me responsible is a positive but non-theoretical fact

that, by obligating me, turns my attitude into one other than the objectifying one that still prevails in apophatic theory (*DVI*, 12).

God

To understand why and how, "after the death of God," one can still philosophize about God, one might turn to the beginning of *Totality and Infinity*. We find there an analysis of Desire (*TI*, 3–5) whose main purpose is to show that, in contrast with need, desire is not a lack or privation. A need can be filled and satisfied; but the hunger of a desire grows the more it approaches the desideratum. Desire is a dynamic relation toward something that cannot be contained, encompassed, assimilated, or integrated by the desiring subject.

The desideratum is "absolute," i.e., *ab-solutum*, ab-solved or separated, and yet it orients and "moves by being desired." Levinas characterizes the opposition between the absoluteness of the desideratum and the desiring subject with terms found in Plato's *Sophist*. At the beginning of his book, the desideratum is only "other" in a still abstract, indeterminate, and anonymous sense, while the desiring subject is called "the same" because it is the self that tends to absorb all things within itself. Desire is the initial movement that—beyond satisfaction—wants and aims at the separate, exterior "other." But where and how does this "other" become concrete? Levinas announces two of its concrete "realizations" when he writes: "It [the alterity of the other] is intended, aimed at, and pre-understood as otherness of *Autru* and as otherness of the Most-High."²⁰ In *Totality and Infinity*, the reference to the most-High is not developed, the entire book concentrates on the relation between the other person and me, who am overwhelmed by the other's epiphany. It is only in later writings that the otherness of God is unfolded.²¹

I will not dwell on Levinas' philosophical theology, first, because this cannot be explained in a few minutes, and second, because it is not a presupposition of the other parts of his philosophy. I do, however, want to say something about the role of God in Levinas' philosophical thought, because this is often misunderstood. His discourse on God is comparable to that of Kant's dialectic of practical reason, insofar as the existence of God is not presupposed by his analytics, but rather is the crowning perspective and consecration of an independently developed foundation of ethics. Levinas' metaphysical ethics likewise can do without God, and he, too, thinks that it is impossible to philosophize about God before discovering the sources of ethics in the human world. True, a relation to God is somehow always already constitutive of the human mind—in this Levinas follows the classical tradition—but we cannot become aware of it unless we are awakened by the ethical challenge that speaks to us in the face of another person.

In regard to commentators who have criticized Levinas' philosophy as a disguised theology, I would like to respond, *first*, that the question of God

has belonged to the basic questions of non-Christian and Christian philosophy from Parmenides to Nietzsche and beyond, and that its reemergence in a "postmodern" philosophy might be proof of its thoroughness, instead of proving that piety cannot be combined with rigorous thinking; and *second*, that Levinas' philosophy is not founded on the existence of God or on any other theory that bases ethics on religion.

One might object, however, that very early in *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas appeals to Descartes' "idea of the Infinite," which is certainly an idea of God. Such an objection offers a welcome opportunity to dwell for a moment on Levinas' retrieval of classical metaphysics.

Metaphysics

In the introduction to *Totality and Infinity* and in several other texts, Levinas indeed refers to Descartes' often neglected statement that consciousness, after the universal doubt, contains not one but two original and irreducible ideas: the idea of the *ego* as *cogitans* and the idea of the infinite.²² Levinas interprets this "idea of the infinite" as a constitutive relation between the subject and that which cannot be absorbed, contained, or comprehended by the subject. It is thus equivalent to a transcendence that cannot return into the subject. Although it is obvious that Descartes, with the entire tradition of Christian philosophers, understands "the infinite" as a name for God, Levinas thinks that the formal structure of the idea of the Infinite can be abstracted from its concretization as relation to God. In *Totality and Infinity*, he appeals to this formal structure to introduce the notion of a transcendence that relates and separates a human subject and some, as yet indeterminate, other—an other that is concretized through his (quasi) phenomenology of a *human* other. The other person "fulfills" the transcending subject's openness without being contained by it. The human other is the concrete figure of the separate yet related absolute and transcendent Infinite. The world "infinite" is thus understood by Levinas as evoking the impossibility of being contained by a human mind. The other—either human or divine—does not fit into the space of the mind; it transcends the universe of all phenomena and thus the entire realm of intentionality and ontology. As "having" the idea of the infinite, consciousness "thinks more than it can think," i.e., it is constituted as related and referring to what it cannot grasp, assimilate, contain, or comprehend. When Levinas, after *Totality and Infinity*, asks how God likewise is other, transcendent, absolute, and infinite, the formal structure borrowed from Descartes is concretized differently. The relation to God cannot be filled or fulfilled at all; the words "epiphany," "revelation," and "enigma," used to evoke the human other, do not have the same sense when they are used to refer to God, because "He" does not present himself in any way. He only left a trace and this trace is revealed through the face of humans whom I encounter. God has already left the place and time where

I meet others; "He" has withdrawn into an immemorial past, leaving us with the human others who take his place.

Notwithstanding the unconventional twist he gives to Descartes' conception of the infinite, Levinas' "metaphysics" obviously continues the metaphysical tradition from Plato to Hegel, when he rethinks the original transcendence of the mind without constructing any world (or heaven) above or behind this human world. More than Descartes, however, Plato is the philosopher who inspires Levinas' philosophy; his idea of "the Good beyond the essence" is a more appropriate name for God as discovered through the ethical challenge of the other. The infinite Good reveals what we truly desire, namely being good, despite the needs of our hedonism. Plato's accurate descriptions of the combat between two ethical attitudes—wrongly interpreted as a metaphysical dualism—are retrieved in Levinas' opposition of hedonic economy and ethical responsibility. "The Good" is more eloquent than "the infinite" because it indicates the originary coincidence of the ethical and the metaphysical, recognized by Plato and maintained in the Platonic tradition, but lost in the tradition of modern philosophy. Despite many differences, Levinas is so close to Plato that his own résumé of *Totality and Infinity* presents this book as "a return to Platonism."²³

Hermeneutics

I want to conclude with a remark on Levinas' attitude toward the hermeneutic movement, as it has developed in the traces of Heidegger and Gadamer.

A recurrent expression in Levinas' descriptions is "*tout se passe comme si . . .*," which may be translated as "(if I am not mistaken), it looks like . . ." When I once asked Levinas why he used this expression so often, he hinted at the difficulty of the search and the tentative character of all phenomenology. I would like to elaborate on this hint by contrasting it to a thesis that is taken for granted by hermeneutics.

All of our attempts to make the truth of things visible, audible, or touchable are accompanied and to some extent guided by suggestions that come from the culture in which we are steeped. Many interpretations have conditioned and preformed our perceptions. Phenomenology was established as an attempt to make a fresh start: we would put all scientific and other interpretations between parentheses and focus all of our attention on the "things themselves." But in the course of this enterprise, we have discovered that we cannot free ourselves from the interpretative communities and traditions that have pervaded our senses, attention, and entire mindset. For Levinas, this means, for example, that the poetry of Poesjkin, Racine, Baudelaire, Valérie and Rimbaud, the novels of Tolstoy and Dostoyevski, the prose of Claudel and Blanchot, the Bible, and the Talmudic traditions are sources of his perceptivity. It is then not surprising that the picture of the human universe arising from his descriptions, bears the mark of his own

culture. Levinas would not deny the influence of the contexts that are involved in his examination of our shared experiences. He would not agree, however, with the hermeneutic school insofar as it proclaims the absolute universality of the horizon and the absolute necessity of contextualization. Though he himself insists on the necessity of analyzing the concrete circumstances and phenomenological implications of any intention, affirming time and again that the ladders cannot be thrown away, his main discovery is that the other does not fit into any horizon. The other disrupts all contexts, worlds, totalities, and encompassing horizons. The other, the relation to the other, and I myself as involved in it, cannot be perceived or understood as parts or elements or movements of anything else. The other makes a hole in the world; the other is un-worldly. Being-in-the-world is *not* the all-encompassing reality; or rather, because the world is a totality or universe, it cannot be the ultimate. The absolute or infinite is "exterior" and strange; it comes from elsewhere. Its enigmatic character alienates us from settling in the homeyness of a well-fenced place. As soon as someone speaks to me, I am unsettled, invoked, and provoked to the restlessness of an ethical journey without end.

Conclusion

Parmenidean and Spinozistic metaphysics, Hegelian dialectics, Heideggerian ontology, post-Heideggerian hermeneutics, and all other forms of synthesis and totalization, admirable as they are, are not able to do justice to the main enigmas of everyone's daily life. As long as philosophy remains a thematic theory, its highest task lies in a rigorous discourse about the necessity of passing through and beyond philosophy by following a reference that cannot be comprehended within the limits of the understandable.²⁴

Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in the notes to this essay:

- AE* Emmanuel Levinas. *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*. Vol. 54 of *Phaenomenologica*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974. 8th ed. Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1988.
- Beyond* Adriaan T. Peperzak. *Beyond: The Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1997.
- CP* Emmanuel Levinas. *Collected Philosophical Papers*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987.
- DEE* ——. *De l'existence à l'existant*. Paris: Vrin, 1st ed. 1947. 2nd ed. 1978.
- DVI* ——. *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée*. Paris: Vrin, 1982.

- EDHH ——. *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*. 3rd ed. Paris: Vrin, 1974.
- TI ——. *Totalité et infini: Essai sur l'extériorité*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1961.
- To the Other Adriaan T. Peperzak. *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*. Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1993.

Notes

- 1 "Questions et réponses" in *DVI*, 128–57.
- 2 *DVI*, 143.
- 3 E.g., *DVI*, 139–42, *AE*, 8 n. 4, 152, 161. See *Beyond*, 231–34.
- 4 For a more elaborate treatment of the relation between philosophy and religion in Levinas, see "Judaism According to Levinas," in *Beyond*, 18–37.
- 5 A few arguments for the thesis stated here peremptorily are developed in "Philosophia," *Faith and Philosophy* 14, no. 3 (1997): 321–33.
- 6 For a sketch of this transformation in relation to Husserl and Heidegger, see "From Phenomenology through Ontology to Metaphysics: Levinas's Perspective on Husserl and Heidegger from 1927 to 1950," "Through Being to the Anarchy of Transcendence," and "On Levinas' Criticism of Heidegger," in *Beyond*, 38–52, 72–120, and 204–17. A clear self-presentation of Levinas' (trans) phenomenology is "La conscience non-intentionnelle," in his *Entre Nous. Essais sur le penser-à-l'autre* (Paris: Grasset, 1991), 141–51.
- 7 The addition "or other" (*ou autres*) seems to me a lapse, for the aim of an intentional analysis is to show the *phenomenological* implications. Even the mention of "deductive" and "dialectical" is debatable, because—as Husserl showed—logical notions and relations, too, have a phenomenological aspect.
- 8 *TI*, 82–94.
- 9 Cf. *TI*, 125–49 and Martin Heidegger, *Vorträge und Aufsätze* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1954), 139–56.
- 10 *TI*, 174; *AE*, 33. Cf. *To the Other*, 42–43.
- 11 Cf. M. Heidegger, "Vom Wesen und Begriff der Φύσις; Aristoteles, Physik B, 1," in *Wegmarken*, vol. 9 of Gesamtausgabe (Frankfurt a.m.: Vittorio Klostermann, 1976), 239–301; see *To the Other*, 13–41–42, 131, 139.
- 12 For this wavering, see *To the Other*, 140–41 and 202–8. For the use of the Platonic καὶ ἄλλο to distinguish the other as a kind of "an sich" from all other "beings," which are parts of the worldly totality, see, for example, *TI*, 21, 36–37, 46–47, 158, 272 (64–65, 74–75, 183).
- 13 *Republic* 517b, 518d, and for example, *TI*, 76 (102–3). The title of *Otherwise than Being or beyond Essence* is a twofold translation of Plato's "ἐπέκεινεν ἄλλῃ οὐσίᾳ."
- 14 Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1003a20–b18. For Levinas' rejection of the *analogia entis*, see *TI*, 278, *AE*, 4, and *To the Other*, 140, 207–8.
- 15 Cf. *DEE* 93–105; *TI*, 115–16, 120–21, 164–65; and *AE*, 207–10.
- 16 Cf., for example, *AE* 3–6, 33–39, 49–55.
- 17 Cf. *De l'évasion*: Fata Morgana, 1982.
- 18 *AE*, 14–15; *DVI*, 12. Cf. *To the Other*, 225.
- 19 See "Passages," in *Beyond*, 171–78.

- 20 *TI*, 4. "*Entendre*," translated here as "intended, i.e., aimed at and understood" renders Husserl's *meinen*, which expresses the intentional character of all intentions.
- 21 Cf. "La trace de l'autre," in *EDHH*, 187–202; "Dieu et la philosophie," in *DVI*, 93–127; and *AE*, x, 13–17, 195–206, 219–33.
- 22 Cf. René Descartes, *Oeuvres*, ed. Ch. Adam and P. Tannery (Paris: Vrin, 1973 ff.), 7: 45–46; 9: 36, 38, 48, and *TI*, 18–20, 185–87.
- 23 See a translation of this résumé in my *Platonic Transformations: With and After Hegel, Heidegger, and Levinas* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997), 120–21.
- 24 I thank Laurel Dantzig and Katrine Poe for polishing the English of this text.

LEVINAS AND THE ELEMENTAL

John Sallis

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What, then, of nature?

Not only in its immediacy but, even more, in that guise in which, after the turn from it, it nonetheless returns. For philosophy—ever since it set out on its δεύτερος πλοῦς—has invariably turned away from nature, and always it has been a question of nature's return. Almost as if nature imitated being itself, at least that moment that Levinas outlines with such unprecedented clarity: the cycle by which being, refusing utter negation, returns always in the guise of a phantom, in the elusive form of what Levinas calls the *there is* (*l'il y a*).

In its return, nature will forsake its immediacy and familiarity. As it returns it will appear strange, as if belonging to a region distant from and alien to the human world. In a sense it will have cast off its disguise: it will no longer be the nature that is shaped and formed within the human world and in accord with the measures of that world but rather a nature capable, in its excess, of evoking feelings both of sublimity and of terror. Such elemental nature would, then, not only correspond formally to the *there is* but would display a fundamental—or abysmal—affinity with the *there is*. The question of nature would return in the guise of the question of its proximity to the *there is*.

Another question, too, will then return to haunt the matrix of Levinas' work. A phantom hand will reinscribe, but now with the mark of a question, what Levinas wrote in *Totality and Infinity*: "And there is only man who could be absolutely strange to me [*Et il n'y a que l'homme qui puisse m'être absolument étranger*]."¹ Only man? Only those who are of my kind, even if in a sense of *kind* that is utterly exorbitant? Only those who call themselves human? Not, then, nature even in its most elemental guise? Not even the *there is* itself?

The question that returns with the question of nature is that of the absolutely strange. It is the question of another alterity.

* * *

In *Time and the Other* Levinas introduces the *there is* by beginning with the Heideggerian distinction between *Sein* and *Seiendes*, reformulating the distinction as that between existing (*exister*) and existent (*existant*).² Even though Levinas mentions that he is not ascribing a specifically existentialist sense to these terms, it should not go unremarked that, even with this qualification, the translation is less innocent, less transparent, than its brief presentation might suggest. Even aside from all the questions that would have to be raised about the role played here by the sedimented opposition between essence and existence, there is another reductive temptation broached by this reformulative translation, one perhaps most evident in the parallel presentation in *Existence and Existents*: in this text the distinction is introduced as that "between the individual, the genus, the collective, God, which are beings [*êtres*] designated by substantives, and the event or act [*l'événement ou l'acte*] of their existence."³ Though the sense of *événement* could perhaps be oriented toward that of *Ereignis*, any tendency to regard *Sein* as act—even as act of existence—could only serve, in the end, to reconstitute those traditional conceptualities with which Heidegger has already broken even in *Being and Time*.

But Levinas' translation of the Heideggerian distinction is indeed meant also to mark a break with Heidegger, with the inseparability of existing and existent, a break that Levinas finds anticipated in Heidegger's own discussion of *Geworfenheit*: "It is as if the existent appeared only in an existence that precedes it, as if existence were independent of the existent" (*TO*, 25). For Levinas it is a question, then, of an existing without existents.

In order to approach this existing without existents, Levinas calls upon imagination. Omitting all indications as to how imagination is to be construed here, how it is to be, as it were, detached from the complex of determinations it has undergone from Plato on, omitting also all indications regarding the complicity of imagination with the question of being, Levinas simply proposes that we imagine something, or rather, that we imagine—or try to imagine—nothingness. Here is his proposal as he formulates it in *Time and the Other*:

Let us imagine the return of all things, beings and persons, to nothingness. Are we going to encounter pure nothingness? After this imaginary destruction of all things, there remains, not something, but the fact that *there is* [*le fait qu'il y a*]. The absence of all things returns as a presence, as the place where everything has sunk away, as a density of atmosphere, as a plenitude of the void, or as the murmur of silence.

(*TO*, 25–26)

Thus, the *there is* is what remains, what returns, when everything is—or is imagined to be—destroyed, negated, reduced to nothingness. It is anonymous and impersonal, neither anyone nor anything, no existent at all, an existing without existents, an existing that returns no matter what. In order to speak significantly of it, it seems—judging from Levinas' text—that one must conjoin terms that could never be conjoined in a being, in an existent. One must pair opposites, posing contradictions in various registers: absence returns as a presence that is yet absence returned; there is place that, sunk away, gives no place; there is density and yet the lightness of air; there is plenitude and void, the murmur of silence. What returns is not, then, a new being or form of being arising from the ashes of another in a way that would resolve the contradiction by which the previous form was consumed. Here there is no question of dialectic but, at most, of the interruption of dialectic, the suspension of *Aufhebung*. The *there is* “which returns in the heart of every negation” is no being at all but also is not nothing; it is “the spectre, the phantom [*le revenant, le fantôme*]” of being (*EE*, 100).

Levinas does not hesitate to stress the instability to which thought is exposed in approaching the *there is*. *Existence and Existents* opens with the declaration that the Heideggerian distinction both “imposes itself upon philosophical reflection and with equal facility effaces itself before such reflection” (*EE*, 15). Thought experiences a kind of vertigo in pondering the emptiness of being, of mere existing; it slips imperceptibly from being as being to a being in general, a cause of existence, reenacting that very slip-page that Heidegger has shown to govern the entire history of philosophy.

In *Existence and Existents*, too, Levinas appeals to imagination in order to approach existing without existents. Here, too, he proposes that we imagine the reversion of all beings to nothingness. Here, too, he omits all indications as to how imagination is to be construed, thus leaving undetermined the character of the imaginative enactment that he puts forth as the very means of access to the *there is*. One might suppose that imagination is put in play here not only because it can enact a negation, a reduction of being, that could never in fact be enacted but also because, according to the determination developed in German Idealism, it has the power—indeed, *is* the power—of hovering between opposites and holding them together in their opposition. As in the language that Levinas brings to bear on the *there is*.

In what Levinas writes about the *there is*, there are sustained references to nature and even to elemental nature. For instance, he notes that no substantive can be affixed to the *there is*, that is, that the *il* of the *il y a* is not a substitute for an unexpressed noun but rather simply an impersonal form, as in such expressions as “it rains” or “it is hot” (*EE*, 95; *TO*, 26). Night is even more pertinent to the *there is*: “If the term experience were not inapplicable to a situation that involves the total exclusion of light, we could say that night is the experience itself of the *there is*” (*EE*, 94). The *there is* can be called a nocturnal space, a space filled with darkness, a space full of

the nothingness of everything. Night and darkness can, in a sense, *present* the *there is* precisely because in the darkness of night there is presence of absence and absence of presence: the presence of darkness is the absence of all beings from one's vision. In the phenomenon of the nocturnal, one can, then, get a glimpse of the *there is*, a glimpse that would anchor the *there is* beyond the merely imaginary and that would, in a certain fashion, fulfill the oppositional expressions with which one speaks of the *there is*. Moreover, Levinas alludes to a further concretization, to a further extension in the direction of content: "Darkness, as the presence of absence, is not a purely present content. It is a matter, not of 'something' that remains, but of the very atmosphere of presence, which, to be sure, *can appear later as a content* [emphasis added], but which originally is the impersonal, non-substantive event of the night and the *there is*" (EE, 104). If the darkness of night offers a glimpse of the *there is*, then a certain connection is exposed between the *there is* and such elemental phenomena as night and darkness. Also, as Levinas says, there is a connection between the *il* of the *il y a* and the *il* of *il pleut* and of *il fait chaud*. Is it through an extending of such connections to the elemental that the *there is*, this very atmosphere of presence, can, as Levinas says, "appear later as a content"?

* * *

Levinas introduces the elemental in the course of his analysis, in *Totality and Infinity*, of things and of the properly human relation to things. This relation consists in our living from (*vivre de*). The things that we live from, things as we live from them, are not objects of representations, nor are they means of life, nor are they tools or implements in the sense developed by Heidegger in his analysis of the world of everyday Dasein. They are, rather, things to enjoy, and living from them is a matter of enjoyment (*jouissance*). Alimentation figures prominently here: "To live from bread is therefore neither to represent bread to oneself nor to act on it nor to act by means of it" (TI, 83). Rather, to live from my bread is a matter of enjoyment: "Enjoyment is the ultimate consciousness of all the contents that fill my life—it embraces them" (TI, 83).

On the one hand, then, Levinas extends the sense of things and of our relation to them: he does not limit them to mere objects or to implements but, extending their scope, refers them back to a form of human comportment (namely, enjoyment) that embraces all things, whatever the ways in which they may be further determined. There would seem to be no limit, and the scope of the things from which we live would extend even to the point of bordering on the elemental: "We live from 'good soup,' air, light, spectacles, work, ideas, sleep, etc." (TI, 82). Yet, on the other hand, Levinas insists on a strict limitation with respect to the properly human relation to things, a limitation entailed by the primacy accorded to nourishment and

alimentation ("all enjoyment is . . . alimentation" [*TI*, 83]), a limitation the consequences of which are virtually unlimited. It is a limitation on alterity, a reduction of the alterity of things: Levinas says that the very essence of enjoyment is "the transmutation of the other into the same" (*TI*, 83). Thus, the introduction of enjoyment as the properly human relation to things serves, in the end, only to reconstitute, even if at a more concrete and comprehensive level, the determination of this relation that governs all modern philosophy and that comes to be fully unfolded in German Idealism: 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.⁴ 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. And perhaps even everything elemental in—or at the limit of—nature.

Regarded against the background of this limitation, it is all the more remarkable how Levinas goes on to describe the elemental in ways that would seem to open human comportment beyond the limits of enjoyment as alimentation. Levinas' primary intent is no doubt to show through these descriptions that the properly human relation to the world is, as he says, "irreducible and anterior to the knowledge of that world" (*TI*, 103). The question is whether these descriptions also serve to show that the human relation to the world is irreducible to enjoyment, at least to enjoyment as the transmutation of the other into the same, as the suspension of alterity for the sake of interiority.

Levinas' description of the elemental can be outlined in a series of points:

(1) The things of enjoyment come to us from a background, emerging from and returning to that background in the course of the enjoyment we can have of them. Or rather, it is not so much a matter of a background as of a medium (*milieu*) in which things take shape and within which we take them up in various fashions. Levinas offers several examples of media in which the things from which we live are found: "They are found in space, in the air, on the earth, in the street, along the road" (*TI*, 104). It should not go unremarked that, along with such natural media as air and earth, Levinas indiscriminately includes in this initial enumeration others inseparably linked to human technical productivity (street, road); yet, as the description proceeds, Levinas becomes more discriminating in his choice of instances until finally it is as if he were only enumerating in slightly modernized dress what the ancients—the Greeks—called elements (στοιχεῖα) or roots (ρίζωματα). Yet the point Levinas stresses is that such a medium is irreducible to a system of operational references (as in Heidegger's analysis); rather than consisting merely of references between things, such a medium has its own thickness or density (*épaisseur*). And unlike the things that come to us in the medium, the medium itself is nonpossessable. Again enumerating (earth,

sea, light, city), Levinas concludes: "Every relation or possession is situated within the non-possessable, which envelops or contains without being able to be contained or enveloped. We call it the elemental" (TI, 104).

(2) An element retains a certain indetermination; it has no form that would contain it, and in this sense it is content without form. More precisely, it is indeterminate and noncontained in the sense that it has only a side (*côté, face*). There is the surface of the sea and the edge of the wind: the medium on which this side takes shape is not composed of things but unfolds in its own dimension, with a depth that is incommensurate with the dimensions of the side. The depth of an element does not, as with a thing, conceal a series of other profiles that could be offered to various perspectives. Rather: "The depth of the element prolongs it until it is lost in the earth and in the sky" (TI, 104).

(3) Still more precisely, an element has no side at all, since there is no interval across which one could approach it. One is bathed in it. One is always within it, and one can overcome the elemental only by limiting this interiority of immersion, by an extraterritoriality that gives one a foothold in the elemental.

(4) As long as one does not abstract from one's presence in the medium, the elemental shows no connection to a substance that would support it. It manifests itself as "without origin in a being, although offering itself in familiarity—of enjoyment—as if we were in the bowels of being" (TI, 105). It comes to us from nowhere, determines and is determined by no object, is anonymous. It is not a matter of *something* but rather, says Levinas, enumerating again: "It is wind, earth, sea, sky, air [*C'est du vent, de la terre, de la mer, du ciel, de l'air*]" (TI, 105). If attentive to it, thought does not determine the element as an object, does not construe what it offers as a side with which belong other sides. Rather: "The sky, the earth, the sea, the wind—suffice to themselves" (TI, 105).

(5) The elemental involves a peculiar concealment, a concealment that is not a concealment of anything and that is perhaps indistinguishable from the revelation of an absence. Levinas says that what the quasi-side of an element conceals "is not a 'something' susceptible of being revealed, but an ever-new depth of absence, an existence without existent, the impersonal *par excellence*." He adds, without further elaboration: "This way of existing without revealing itself, outside of being and the world, must be called mythical. The nocturnal prolongation of the element is reign of the mythical gods" (TI, 116). One could say: the recession of the elemental, its withdrawal into fathomless depth, a withdrawal that is neither simply revelation nor concealment—this is the mythical. It is the scene where the mythical gods reign, that is, where they come to appear in their sovereignty.

(6) But the fathomless depth of the elemental is not only to be called mythical. Levinas calls it also "an opaque density without origin, the bad infinite, or the indefinite, the *apeiron*." And in reference to it he writes of the

“materiality of the elemental non-I” and of “the fathomless obscurity of matter” (TI, 132).

(7) Thus, finally, having converged ever more upon it, Levinas links the recession of the elemental to the *there is*: the nocturnal dimension, he says, is the *there is*. Thus: “The element extends into the there is [*L'élément se prolonge dans l'il y a*]” (TI, 116). Again Levinas refers to enjoyment, but now as encountering a kind of limit in the *there is*, or rather, in the element that Levinas appears in this regard to privilege: “Enjoyment, as interiorization, runs up against the very strangeness of the earth” (TI, 116).

* * *

No doubt, then, as Levinas says, enjoyment proves to be limited in its freedom; the moment of enjoyment is not insured against what lurks in the very element from which the things of enjoyment come. Perhaps, too, enjoyment surmounts this uncertainty through labor and especially through establishing the home, which interrupts the rule of the element by, as Levinas says, “opening there the utopia where the ‘I’ recollects itself in dwelling at home with itself” (TI, 130). Perhaps, then, enjoyment only hollows out its own interiority, and perhaps, as Levinas says, it can only end in an “animal complacency in oneself” (TI, 123), at least as long as heterogeneous provocation, unannounced in enjoyment, remains outstanding.

But then, the question is whether every self-reversion must lead to mere animal complacency in oneself, whether the home, in sheltering one from the elements, does not also make it possible to sustain a certain comportment to the elemental, to remain—though sheltered, *as* sheltered—on the earth and elevated toward the sky, existing in the between. Is enjoyment the only way, the all-encompassing way, of comporting oneself to the elemental? Is it the only way in which, for instance, to comport oneself to the mythical as announced in the elemental, announced not as something apart but as the very recession of the elemental? Could an epiphany of the gods, their appearance on the scene of the mythical, evoke nothing but enjoyment and self-reversion? Or could the elemental—as the elements extending into the *there is*, as the coupling of the elements with the *there is*—provoke an ekstasis irrecoverable by enjoyment and its interiorizing movement? Could the elemental provoke a comportment that, rather than leading to self-reversion, would be drawn along in the withdrawal, responsive rather than reactive to the very strangeness of the earth?

Notes

- 1 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et Infini: Essai sur L'extériorité* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1961), 46. Further references are indicated by TI followed by page number.
- 2 Levinas, *Le Temps et L'autre* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1979), 24. This text first appeared as an article in J. Wahl, *Le Choix, Le Monde, L'Existence*

(Grenoble-Paris: Arthaud, 1948). References are to the book version and are indicated by *TO* followed by page number.

- 3 Levinas, *De L'existence à L'existant* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1990), 15. This text originally appeared in 1947. The sections on which I shall focus incorporate Levinas' 1946 article "*Il y a*" (*Deucalion* 1 [1946]: 141–54). Further references are indicated by *EE* followed by page number.
- 4 On the question of eating well as a sheltering of the alterity of things, allowing them to operate as a sign or symbol even of the divine (in its absence), see my paper "Bread and Wine," *Philosophy Today* (1997). See also the interview with Jacques Derrida conducted by Jean-Luc Nancy: "'Il faut bien manger' ou le calcul du sujet," in Jacques Derrida, *Points de Suspension: Entretiens* (Paris: Galilée, 1992).

DIS-POSSESSED

How to remain silent “after” Levinas*

Rudi Visker

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As we look back today to that obscure but for none of us insignificant period of (post) structuralism, it would seem that none of the slogans which at that time were intended to sweeten its message can still claim any credibility. Far from being dead and buried, like some purloined letter, the “author” seems to have been with us all along, barely hidden by the folds of those quotations marks from where he was laughing behind our backs.¹ And far from taking over the place of the subject, “structure” has, so to speak, only displaced it: much to our surprise, the “eccentric” subject is still a subject – it is precisely its dependence on something which it did not itself institute or constitute that has prevented it from dying a peaceful death. Forcing the subject to abdicate from the center did not entail the subject’s destruction.² Quite to the contrary, this decentering has managed to revitalize the subject, and the unexpected result of its rejuvenation is simply that its accusers are now themselves accused: relieved of the heavy burden of a center where it stood constantly accused of falling short in its every endeavor, the subject seems to be thoroughly enjoying its new freedom to linger wherever it pleases, as long as it is not in the center, and to exploit its elusiveness to harass whoever came in its place with new, apparently insoluble questions and problems.³ Granted, discourse functions without a meaning-giving subject underlying all knowledge; but then what could it mean that *I* know? And, of course, knowledge evolves according to rules I have not made, and which continually escape me; but why would I not attempt to break into that archive and show the complex genealogy by which those rules came to be? To be sure, I go through life with a certain name – the name of my father, the name of my people – which precedes me and which obligates me; but isn’t it normal for me to try and know what this obligation asks of me and,

failing to get an answer, can I be blamed for myself attempting to determine what this debt consists in?

Instead of sounding the death knell of the subject, decentering seems to have resulted in a new and different kind of subject: one that would like to know why it was not allowed to die and what the nature of its debt could be; a subject that must try to find its own way, having been denied a center that would provide all the answers. An explosive situation no doubt, for what could be more dangerous than a debt that is determined by the debtor himself? Is it not the echo of such explosions that recently gave cause for alarm: one need only think of the recent upsurge of nationalism? The difficulty seems to be that the subject is far from content with the ambivalent situation in which it finds itself after being decentered: what it cannot tolerate is not so much that it is excluded from the center, but that it cannot do away with that center, to which it is nonetheless denied access. Now that it has given up its claims, it fails to understand why it cannot die in peace. It fails to understand that whatever dispossessed it after all still obligates it. It thought it could disappear – we all remember: “a face in the sand . . .” – but now that it has sobered up, it discovers that the scenario for its voluntary retirement was really just an excuse to make it work even harder. In its old age the subject finds itself forced into discharging a debt it has nothing to do with, a debt to a center that it thought it had turned its back on and left behind. . . .

Decentering the subject, then, aimed at more than a mere change of position: at stake was an asymmetry in which the subject is obligated by “something”⁴ without ever having given its consent and without even being consulted in the matter. The position from which it finds itself being put under obligation is not a position that it could possibly occupy in its turn. The addressor and the addressee of “obligation” belong to non-substitutable and non-simultaneous positions: the reason why the subject cannot disappear – and perhaps one must define the subject today as a “not-able-to-disappear” – is to be found precisely in its decentering. The subject did not just happen to arrive too late to take up its place in the center; it is itself the effect of this originary delay. It is that which cannot be where it would like to be. It is not without a center, but caught in the unbreakable spell of something from which it derives its singularity. Accordingly, what is most “proper” to the subject, what lies at the basis of its irreplaceability, of its non-interchangeable singularity – in short of its being “itself” – has nothing to do with some secret property or some hidden capacity, but results from a lack of resources on its part, from its ineliminable poverty, its incapacity: the subject is something that has missed an appointment, and it would never have even existed without that break, rent or gap through which it gains, rather than loses, its intimacy, or without that non-simultaneousness or that “retardation” *vis-a-vis* itself through which, if we are to believe Levinas, it can fall into time and be

“related” to the Other without being absorbed into them.⁵ Even before it is able, the subject is a “not-able,” and whatever it can do, it can only do on the basis of and within the horizon opened by the “not-able.”

No doubt this is why, instead of seeing in the subject an active principle, contemporary philosophy prefers to emphasize the receptivity that must precede this activity. The subject is no longer thought as an auto-affectation, but as an affectedness by the other. And contemporary thought seems to expect a kind of salvation from this passivity or passibility (Lyotard) which, as the expression goes, precedes all opposition between activity and passivity. The anaesthesia of a completely technical world in which there is a system that controls not only its own output but also its own input,⁶ this nightmare which, since Heidegger, has emerged on our horizon, could only have its inexorable advance arrested by a renewed attention for this affectedness or this “aesthesia” which involves the subject in a past that is absolute and irrevocable: a past that has never been present nor ever will be present; a past which, precisely by withdrawing, leaves behind a being who must find salvation in his helplessness.

One might wonder if such commonplaces bring us any further. They are, no doubt, too suggestive to be precise. But perhaps for that very reason they are able to invoke something of our strange climate of thought which might best be defined by a certain impatience with all those (supposed) attempts to eliminate the subject, and by the desire to know how things stand with it and what will come after it, assuming its place has been vacated. Questions that seem of utmost importance, and that have led – or misled, as some would argue – such a notable philosopher as Habermas to the conclusion that what is at stake in the attempt to find a way out of the philosophy of the subject is the heritage of modernity itself. But the paradigm shift that Habermas represents – a turning from subjectivity to intersubjectivity⁷ – has, to put it mildly, not been greeted with universal enthusiasm. And since the opposition that is marshalled in the name of a certain postmodernity seems to be concerned precisely with this emphasis on the receptivity of a subject who finds himself in an irrevocably asymmetric position, I thought it not unwise to drop anchor for a moment in these murky waters to which the pilots of modernity and postmodernity have towed the Kantian ship. Or into which, Levinas will suggest, that ship has towed them. This suggestion seems to me to merit consideration: it ought to allow us to appreciate the uncompromising position that Levinas occupies in the contemporary crisis of post-Kantian ethics. This is more or less the program for my first half: an attempt, let us say, to not underestimate the “opponent.” And what an opponent! For how could one even begin to think about the problems under consideration here without first having spent some time – and perhaps a very long time⁸ – wandering through the incredibly rich heritage Levinas has bequeathed us? Wasn’t he one of the first to have insisted on the absoluteness of a past that is too much past to ever become present, and to have linked

this absoluteness with all of those themes so dear to us, and for which we use his own words: asymmetry, hetero-affection, passivity older than every opposition between activity and passivity? Wasn't it Levinas who taught us to define the subject as something that does not have the choice of disappearing, and who related the subject to an outside that is so much outside that it can allow itself to go to the very heart of the subject without running the risk of becoming a part of it or being absorbed by it? Are we not quoting Levinas when we speak of the "other in the self," and do we not share his *own* suspicion when we attempt to think the subject on the basis of a "dispossession" that would be more originary than every form of possession? All of this is undoubtedly true and we ought to be grateful. But Levinas, whose entire philosophy attempts to dispel even the tiniest hint of ek-stasis, would surely agree that gratitude should be cool-headed, and should maintain an awareness of the distance separating the one who teaches from the one who is taught. Keeping this distance is the program for my second half: as we shall see, it is a matter of a single, but not insignificant, word. It is, for Levinas, the first word, a word that passes our lips, nowadays, none too easily, a word that we tend to mention rather than use. Which is why the significance and function of this word in Levinas fascinate me, and why I would like to know what happens when this word is dropped, or rather – since it is a word that we have wanted for a long time to drop – I would be interested to know how much damage resulted from leaving this word behind. Perhaps I ought to apologize for such curiosity. It will take up much of our time, but that is just the time needed in order to answer the question that this article was meant to address: the question whether "subjectivity implies a certain closedness that seems difficult to reconcile with the desire for openness and receptivity so prevalent these days".⁹ There is, in my opinion, nothing to be said about this closedness so long as one avoids confronting this first word of Levinas. I have not yet said *what* word, but it will not keep us waiting long – for it is only by introducing the word "God"¹⁰ that Levinas can avoid being drawn into the maelstrom where Habermas and Lyotard attempt to keep their boats afloat. But not to panic: we will maintain, as mentioned already, a safe distance.

Levinas in the crisis of post-Kantian ethics

Defending the logic of obligation against the moderns

It is well known that, for Kant, practical reason is both legislation and efficient causality. In order to bring autonomy into ethics, Kant had to show that reason contains within itself both a *principium diiudicationis bonitatis* and a *principium executionis bonitatis*.¹¹ Reason should be capable of showing us what has to be done, without having recourse to any considerations other than those that follow from the structure of reason itself

(first principle). Yet reason should also have the power to execute the actions that are proposed because they comply with reason (second principle). The first principle led Kant to the discovery of the categorical imperative, while the second led – much later – to what became known as the doctrine of the “fact of reason.” Only by bringing these two principles together could Kant reach the conclusion that the law is obligatory *because* it is universal, where, as Lyotard has shown,¹² the “because” operates like an “iff.” Accordingly, Kant’s first formulation of the categorical imperative lends itself to a double reading: not only “if the norm of such-and-such an action is a universally obligatory norm, then you must perform this action”, but also “if you must accomplish such-and-such an action, then the maxim of your will is a universally obligatory norm.” Both “if p then q” (if reason then will), and “if q then p” (if will then reason, i.e. universality); in other words, “p iff q.”

In support of his claim that the underlying transformation of an obligation into a norm is valid, Kant had to introduce an extremely elaborate conceptual architectonics. Since it is precisely this architectonics that was so vigorously assailed by Kant’s immediate followers,¹³ it should come as no surprise that it is on this exact point that contemporary Continental philosophy appears to have become deadlocked. Take, for instance, Habermas’s attempt to reformulate the categorical imperative, giving it the intersubjective spin of a discursive ethics organized around the so-called “D-principle:” “only those norms may claim to be valid that could meet with the consent of all affected in their role as participants in a practical discourse”.¹⁴ As a consequence, the categorical imperative would be freed from its bondage to a “monologic” reason and readapted to function as a rule of argumentation in practical discourses: “for a norm to be valid, the consequences and side effects of its general observance for the satisfaction of each person’s particular interests must be acceptable to all” (*ibid.*). But Habermas’s critics reply that this only holds for the logic of norms and, moreover, already presupposes what is to be shown: that the transition from obligations to norms is unproblematic. Thus Lyotard’s objection that the whole question of the lawfulness of the law – of its obligatory character – is not even raised here. Lyotard insists that one cannot understand why an ethical law holds if one remains caught in this alternative: either *convincing* (hence reasonable) or else *constraining* (hence unreasonable).¹⁵ For a law does not hold because it convinces, nor because it constrains, but because it *obligates*. It takes the form of a prescription that places the addressee in the asymmetric position of a “Thou” to whom the prescription is directed. Such a prescription obligates whether or not the addressee is convinced of its correctness. Its prescriptive force does not depend on such a deliberation; indeed, to make it so depend would mean abandoning the logic of obligation and transforming the law into a commentary on the law, thus replacing *prescription* with *description*. And of course, for Lyotard, who has made it his task to “testify to the Differend,” this is an unjustified move. The prescriptive clause “it is

an order that p" is transformed into the descriptive clause "someone has said that p must be done (by me)." And it is precisely this transformation that Habermas carries out in order to determine what "valid norms" are: the maxim which says that p must be done will only be a valid norm if, in Habermas's formulation, it can count on the agreement of all those concerned. But this whole procedure necessarily presupposes that instead of remaining in the asymmetric position of one who is obligated by a prescription, each participant in such a practical discourse can freely occupy the position from which the prescription is addressed. A norm is valid only if the addressees of the prescription could "at the same time" regard themselves, without coercion, as its addressors. Which is to say that a norm is valid only if it could *convince* all those concerned. But of course, like Kant, Habermas also wants to make the reverse claim: if one is convinced by a (moral) validity claim, then one is committed to defending it, and the result of such a defence must be such that it satisfies the conditions for a valid norm.¹⁶ Just as with Kant, "p if and only if q."

Both Lyotard and Levinas would protest here, though not for the same reasons. I will come back to this point later. For the moment, let us concentrate on their rather curious alliance against humanism, or at least against a certain version of humanism.¹⁷ For both Lyotard and Levinas, it is a humanism that still believes in the possibility of doing away with an *Unmündigkeit* (the famous "immaturity" in Kant's "What is Enlightenment?") that one owes only to oneself. And yet, Lyotard wonders,¹⁸ might there not be a different *Unmündigkeit* than the one Habermas has in mind, and is *this Unmündigkeit* not excluded *a priori* whenever one substitutes the logic of norms ("either convincing or else constraining") for the logic of obligation? Is there not in obligation another, more deeply buried *Unmündigkeit*, an inability to speak and – *a fortiori* – to argue, an "in-fantia" that one cannot and should not render communicatively transparent, for to do so would mean destroying "something" (something which Lyotard calls "the inhuman") that belongs to the very condition of our humanity? An "inhuman" that, far from being a simple denial of our humanity, constitutes its very tissue, to the point that Lyotard can even refer to it as our "soul:" that other in me to whom I owe a vague debt, but which is precisely *inhuman* because it left me this debt without telling me what I must do in order to pay it off. The result of this emphasis on the passivity (or "passibility") of the subject is that the human subject's humanity is tied to a "mancipium"¹⁹ from which it cannot e-mancipate itself. There is some "Thing" that obligates it without it ever being able to abandon the position it is forced to take as a result of this (quasi) obligation. The subject is de-centered, not because it lacks a center but because, in its singularity, it gravitates around a center it can neither have access to nor simply leave behind. Given this position, one can well imagine why Lyotard remains sceptical about the hopes that Habermas has invested in the operative power of practical discourse. For in terms of the

above discussion, it seems that the Habermasian transformation of values into valid norms would require participants who not only argue *from* a center that has them in its grasp (the values "have" them), but who also have managed to break *into* that center and exercise argumentative control over it (they "have" the values). Failing such ideal participants, practical discourse could not consist only of those reactions to validity claims allowed by Habermas's model: affirmation ("yes"), negation ("no"), or suspension (a future "yes" or "no").²⁰ If one of the participants were to say, for example, "and yet these are my values; I have them simply because I have them," then *according to this model* the discussion would only come to a temporary end, since the reason given is actually not a reason at all. There is only an incapacity for argument, an "infantia" which, for Habermas, is only the temporary absence of something still to come (or which should already have come). Such a subject – in opposition to Lyotard and Levinas – is only temporarily *unmündig*. Its lack of *Mündigkeit* would not point to its de-centering but would need to be seen as deriving from its being only stalled halfway in its attempt to break into a center to which it already had right of access, and the ensuing dissociation between the participants would need to be regarded as a *dissensus* that emerges against the background of a possible *consensus*. Not that Habermas would go so far as to say that one could (or should) in principle reach a consensus; his point is only that, if one enters into argument, then one is already committed to a possible "yes" or "no," and the "no" which claims that things are like this simply because things are like this is not really a "no." It is rather a kind of silence that derives its status from the order it has withdrawn from. That it could derive this status from an order opposed to the argumentative order that Habermas has in mind; that it could point to an obligation that obligates without the addressee knowing the reasons for the obligation; that it could be a silence which concerns something more and something other than simply the factual absence of future speech, the silence of a dissensus that cannot be forced into an argumentative "yes" or "no" – this possibility is ruled out from the start by the assumptions from which Habermas explicitly begins: there is no "silence" that does not already point to an imminent "yes" or "no." In the end, "validity" will rule over "meaning." Consequently, the dispute over the possibility of what Lyotard calls the "differend" is itself at the root of the "differend" separating Habermas and Lyotard.²¹ The hiatus between prescription ("you must") and description ("something obligates me to do this or that") cannot be traversed by argument, for that would presuppose that one has access to the "something" that obligates, and that one could assent to its reasons for obligating – which means that the hiatus must already have been bridged before it can be bridged.

But, of course, if one denies Kant or his followers the transition from prescription to description, then one replaces autonomy with heteronomy. As a consequence, the law is no longer obligatory because (iff) it is universal;

it is now obligatory because it is obligatory.²² In doing this, however, one would seem to have thrown away Kant's first principle (*diudicatio bonitatis*) and thus to have surrendered ethics to what Lyotard calls "the anxiety of idiolect."²³ For if it is only the fact of obligation that allows me to recognize the ethical law, and if I am the only one who finds himself in the asymmetric position of the law's addressee (hence *idio*-lect), and if there is no possibility of trading or even comparing my responsibility with that of others (cf. "is my maxim universalizable?"), then how can I ever know if the appeal that obligates me is an *ethical* one? How will I even know that there is an appeal? Both Abraham and President Schreber heard the voice of God, and they each heard a voice that spoke only to them (i.e. *idiolect*). Did they *both* hear the voice of God? And did they both hear the voice of *God*? Can a voice that commands me to kill my own son be the voice of God? Did I not just imagine hearing a voice, when in fact it was only my own infanticidal urges? Does it even really matter which voice I heard, as long as there is obligation? Instead of trying to escape these problems, Lyotard seems satisfied with simply acknowledging them. Suggesting a *rapprochement* with Levinas, he seems content to summarize them in the statement that "obligation should be described as a scandal for the one who is obligated" (D nr. 170). And on this point the alliance falls apart. Levinas's position may not be modern, but neither is it postmodern.²⁴ As we shall see, it is – and I use the term in a neutral sense – anti-modern.²⁵

Specifying the logic of obligation against the postmoderns

Although Levinas would side with Lyotard in stressing the importance of the asymmetric position of the one obligated by the ethical law, he would also want to protest against Lyotard's pagan appropriation of some of his major concepts. Their disagreement has to do with the identity of what Lyotard calls the addressor. Contrary to Lyotard, Levinas is not content to characterize the ethical law solely by the fact that whoever is put under obligation finds himself "placed in the position of addressee for a prescription" (D nr. 163) and then to simply call this a scandal. Levinas would like to say a word about the addressor as well. Though he will emphasize that responsibility "precedes freedom" (OB 197 n 27) and that values "weigh" on the subject," thus pointing to a fundamental passivity "which cannot assume what it receives, but which, in spite of itself, becomes responsible for it" (OB 198 n 28), what he wants to emphasize above all else is that this "antecedence of responsibility to freedom" signifies "the *Goodness of the Good*: the necessity that *the Good* choose me first before I can be in a position to choose, that is, welcome its choice" (OB 122). To be sure, ethics has to do with an absolute appeal, as Lyotard also admits, but this appeal is precisely an *ethical* appeal because its addressor is the Good. Neglecting this difference and mistaking what is only a necessary condition (obligation) for a sufficient

one, inevitably leads to the problems that Lyotard has signalled under the heading "anxiety of idiolect." But for Levinas, these problems are only a consequence of the pagan *quid pro quo* that makes values depend on drives, instead of *vice versa*. "From the Good to me there is assignation: a relation that survives the 'death of God.'" The death of God perhaps signifies only the possibility to reduce every value arousing an impulse to an impulse arousing a value" (OB 123). Accordingly, Lyotard's brand of postmodernism is for Levinas only the return of the sacred, a return that becomes inevitable when, along with the idea of the Good, the idea of the holy is lost as well. For the holy is not the sacred, but the only thing that can prevent it from overwhelming us.

If one misses this distinction between the sacred and the holy, one will have missed the structure of Levinasian ethics. To be sure, ethics for Levinas is a matter of "something" that "has chosen me before I have chosen it" (OB 11) and he, too, will consider the ethical subject as carrying an "other-in-himself" that he will explicitly designate as the "soul" (OB 191 n 3). But what thus "penetrates" the subject "with its rays unbeknownst to itself (*a l'insu*)"²⁶ (OB 11) is not simply that inhuman "Thing" around which we gravitate without ever reaching it, as Lyotard thinks in the wake of Lacan. It is not something which attracts us but which we can never reach, since the condition for its "fatal attraction"²⁷ is that we have always already lost it and that we derive our singularity from this loss since it is only through this loss that we are who we are. To be sure, ethics for Levinas too is about an absolute past and refers back to a trauma that is too great to be taken up. But, unlike for Lacan²⁸ or Lyotard, the problem for Levinas is not that of a "tragic ethics" which says that we should not "give way on our desire" and at the same time shows us the terrible consequences of not giving way on our desire. The problem is not how we should relate to the "Thing" that makes us non-interchangeable nor how, at the same time, that opaque attachment must be interrupted by another dimension (Lacan's "law of the signifier," Lyotard's "norms") so that we can maintain enough distance from that point where we would, as it were, become so singular that we would suffocate in our own singularity. The Good for Levinas is not good because it attracts us, but because it interrupts such an attraction: "The fact that in its goodness the Good *declines the desire it arouses while inclining it* toward responsibility for the neighbor, *preserves difference* in the non-indifference of the Good, which chooses me before I welcome it" (OB 123, my emphasis). One does not "gravitate" around the Good. The Good is only good because it breaks that sacred spell – that desire to touch what we have always already lost and which, by that very fact, attracts us – and reorients the course of the dynamic thus awakened, inclining it toward the others. This makes all the difference between the heteronomy Lyotard supports and the special kind of heteronomy found in Levinas.

The Good would be no different from Lyotard's "inhuman" if it were only to place us in the position of an addressee of a (quasi) obligation, leaving us "disoriented" with regard to that "vague debt" we do not know how to deal with. It would obligate us without itself feeling the least obligation to us, thus surrendering us to the whims of that capricious and opaque "law without law" that Lacan calls "the Thing." There would be "something" in us that would, in Levinas's words, "reign in its own way" (OB 194 n 2). A classical heteronomy, where the law is given by an authority outside the law, an "*Horsla-lor*"²⁹ that also behaves as an out-law. But such is not the heteronomy of Levinas; it is rather the sort of heteronomy one gets when the link between the absolute and the Good is severed, as Lacan and Freud have done³⁰ – a heritage that, as we have seen, Lyotard has no hesitation in accepting. But Levinas not only refuses to sever that link, he likewise refuses to see the Good as that authority which precedes the law and arrogates to itself the power to make the law, as is the case in an ordinary ethics of heteronomy. For Levinas, there can only be an ethical law because the Good renounces such a power, because it abdicates and *refuses to "reign"* (OB 194 n 4): "an-archy" of the Good which "chooses" us, but refuses to subject us, thereby making us free. No one, says Levinas, "is enslaved to the Good" (OB 11). We would have been condemned to slavery had the Good manifested itself to us in its full splendor, for then we would have had no chance to avert our gaze. But because the Good is good – i.e. holy and not sacred, "not numinous" (TI 77) – it has given us that chance. And, as is well-known, Levinas "deformalizes" this by pointing us to the trace of something that refuses to present itself, the trace of a transcendence that already "effaced" itself before it could be "assembled" (e.g. OB 161; TI 104). This trace is, of course, the face of the Other: an appeal directed to us, but which is defenceless against our refusal, lacking the means to exact what it asks. The face of the Other is not sacred; it is holy. It is not the object of a taboo, not something whose separation attracts me and, despite the prohibition, arouses in me the desire to touch it. The face is holy because it speaks, and speech for Levinas means establishing a distance. Speech is a prohibition of the contact that would bridge the distance thus established. According to Levinas, the one who speaks to me does not arouse in me the desire to touch him, but accuses me of that desire, transforming it into a desire to serve and give.

Yet the word of the Other would not have this force, were it not the echo of a word that preceded it, were it not the descendant of that first word: "God." The Other can only deflect my urges and escape my attempts at appropriation because he is more than what I see of him. The face is not a phenomenon. In the words of Levinas, "the face breaks through the form that nevertheless delimits it" (TI 198; CPP 96). The Other can only be other because he finds his light in himself, and bears his meaning within. He is, therefore, *kath'auto*: more than what I can know and comprehend – not

unknown but unknowable. So the alterity of the Other is absolute and this absoluteness comes to me under the form of a prohibition, in the face: "Thou shalt not kill me." To kill the Other is to extinguish his light, to reduce him to his form – in other words, to make of him a phenomenon, to reduce his meaning to what I can see of him. And since the Other is not only face, but also form, not only a speaking *to* me, but also a spoken that I hear, the possibility to "kill" him, to reduce him to what I see and hear of him, will always remain open. Without this possibility, there would be neither ethics nor responsibility. Nor could there be ethics or responsibility if this choice I have to make would be indifferent, if it were not qualified. The Other must be not only outside me, but *above me*. To kill him must signify: his *murder*.³¹ To reduce him to his form must signify: to commit an injustice, to rob him of his ethical dignity. *And the Other does not owe this ethical dignity to himself*. The Other is face, a *surplus* over his form; he is a face that is *too large* for his form, and the Other owes this infinity to the fact that he is in the trace of the Infinite. Consequently, the Other for Levinas, *pace* Sartre, is "not simply another freedom: to give me knowledge of injustice, his gaze must come to me from a dimension of the ideal. The Other must be closer to God than I" (CPP 55–56). This elevation of the Other which Levinas calls face would not have been possible without the abdication of the Good that lends his ethics a special sort of heteronomy. By coming in the trace of the Good – or of *the* Infinite, as Levinas so often calls it – the face of the Other is invested with a value that I must and at the same time do not have to respect. The appeal comes from above, but it is an order that implores. I am free to respond to it or not, but whatever I do, I cannot keep *silent*: "I cannot evade *by silence* the discourse which the epiphany that occurs as a face opens, as Thrasy-machus, irritated, tries to do, in the first book of the *Republic* (. . .) Before the hunger of men responsibility is measured only 'objectively;' it is irrecusable. The face opens the primordial discourse whose *first word* is obligation, *which no 'interiority'* permits avoiding. It is that discourse that obliges the entering into discourse, the commencement of discourse rationalism prays for, a 'force' that convinces even 'the people who do not wish to listen' and thus founds *the true universality of reason*" (TI 201).

Hence the program for my second half: what to think of a philosophy that tells us that we cannot be silent, that grants us our interiority but then seems to make this interiority fully signifiable through ethics? What to think of an ethics that *precisely for that reason* – as I shall explain – has made sacrifice "the norm and criterion of the approach" of the Infinite?³² What if it has come too late? What if, apart from this ethical dispossession (TI 172) or decentering that Levinas speaks of, there is still another dispossession that he will not or cannot think, in order to be able to think as he does? At stake then, is but a word, but for Levinas it is the "first word:" "monotheism, the word of the one and only God, is precisely the word that one cannot

help but hear, and cannot help but answer. It is the word that obliges us to enter into discourse. It is because the monotheists have enabled the world to hear the word of the one and only God that Greek universalism can work in humanity and slowly unify that humanity" (DF 178, translation corrected). The death of Parmenides?³³ Or ethical henology?

How to keep silent after Levinas

An ethical resignification of silence

There would be no silence, then, that could evade "the discourse which the epiphany that occurs as a face opens" (TI 201). Of course Levinas is not denying the obvious here, as if, when confronted with the face of the Other, one would not be able to hold one's tongue and refuse to speak. He means that any refusal to respond to the appeal of the face, and thereby to enter "ethical discourse" should be seen as a silence which receives its meaning from that appeal and within that discourse: "silence" is already a falling short of what is demanded. Not only literal silence of course; every attempt to evade the appeal of the Other, every excuse made, is a kind of silence – even if it is announced out loud. For this "true universalism," there is no interiority that can avoid the ethical obligation. We can try to outwit God, like Jonah; we can hide from him, taking refuge in a ship's hold and falling asleep in the midst of a storm. But then we take to sleep the very thing we were trying to avoid,³⁴ thus affirming what we wanted to deny: it may be that there are some responsibilities that we cannot handle, but this does not mean that we do not have them, and once we have them, there can no longer be anything like the sleep of the innocent. *All* sleep is now a lack of wakefulness.

One might find this somewhat exaggerated, but in that case one must ask oneself just what it is about Levinas's ethics that leads to such exaggeration. Better still: one must ask why it is founded upon this exaggeration and cannot get around it. For according to Levinas, ethics begins by "penetrating"³⁵ the armour of my interiority. It is this interiority that is thrown into question by the face: the face does not accuse me of having neglected to do something, nor of doing something which I should not have done. Such is not the responsibility the face confronts me with. Rather, it blames me for something that was out of my hands, for a guilt without fault, or a "fault" that I am not guilty of, but that I am nonetheless responsible for. This "fault" is my existence itself: just by "being there," by taking up a place, by breathing and eating, by all those processes in which I arbitrarily appropriate things, I *inevitably* and unwittingly make a claim on something to which I have no right. And the fact that I have no right to it is not something that Levinas just postulates; he tries to find a phenomenological basis for it in his description of what exactly happens when I am confronted

with the appeal of the Other. It is to this description that one must refer if one maintains that Levinas is doing a phenomenological ethics, or an ethical phenomenology – a characterization that should be kept separate from the role played by the notion of the “face” in this ethics since, as we have seen, the face is not a phenomenon. Indeed, according to Levinas it is precisely because the face is *not* a phenomenon – precisely because it does not *show* itself to me, but rather *addresses* me and *appeals* to me – that it manages to embarrass me. The appeal of the Other does something to me that no phenomenon could ever do: it disconcerts me and gives me a conscience that is primarily and necessarily a *bad* conscience since it questions and casts in doubt something which, until then, I would not have been able to question: “what is most natural becomes the most problematic. Do I have the right to be? Is being in the world not taking the place of someone?”³⁶ “Does not my existence, in its peacefulness and with the good conscience of its *conatus*, mean that I let the other person die?” (DQI 248). The Other puts my very existence in question: my place on this earth suddenly appears as a usurpation, for which I am ashamed. And this shame forms the phenomenological cornerstone on which Levinas’s ethics rests. Place this in question, and one places all the rest in question.

Nevertheless, it is a question that can hardly be avoided. For is it indeed the case that my reaction to the appeal of the Other is one of shame? Do I then suffer the bad conscience of one who realizes that he has no right to his rights nor even to his existence, and for whom that existence, formerly so evident, suddenly appears in all its “hatefulness” (DQI 248), “imperialism” (OB 110, 121) and “egoism” (TRO 353)? Is it true that in the confrontation with the face of the Other, I not only see my naturalness put into question, but that in the same move I also experience it as something which, for me to keep it, will henceforth require me to make an unnatural (for ethically qualified) move? Levinas seems to think so, and it is perhaps unsurprising that in order to buttress this assertion – or this description – he resorts to a vocabulary deriving from Sartre: the ethical appeal, one reads in *Otherwise Than Being*, turns me into a *pour autrui* (AE 81/(OB 64)). I cease to be *pour soi* (AE 67/(OB 52)) and become a hostage of the Other without ever coinciding with him; I am “turned inside out,” “denucleated,” “dispossessed,” “uprooted” and, strangely enough, it is this “abdication” that takes place “despite myself”,³⁷ this abandoning of my spontaneous naturalness that, for Levinas, frees me (TI 88), humanizes me, and summons me to my “final essence” (TI 179). In order to be, to be “there,” to be “someone,” being – as it were – had to be enclosed within my person, and not by choice but by necessity; the alternative would mean that I as a person would disappear in the anonymous night of what Levinas calls the *il y a*. And yet, it is exactly this *conatus*, this “closedness” (TI 148) in Being that is thrown into “crisis” by the gaze of the Other (DQI 248). A crisis which, for Levinas, summons this interiority “from the outside” (OB 150) and exposes a level

deeper than my “closedness” where I am first of all an “openness” (OB 115), an inability to “remain in [my]self” (CPP 149), an “inability to shut myself up” (CPP 150), and yet a “self” that is not interchangeable with that of others, because it is *this* self that is responsible for those others, and it has this responsibility to thank for the dispossession which singularizes it and makes it a self. It is with regard to this level that Levinas calls ethics a *religion*: *religare* which binds me *with others* (*noué*, AE 96/OB 76) and devotes me to them (*voué*, DQI 249) even before I am bound to myself. And it is from this point of view that henceforth *every* attempt – albeit only momentary – to escape this appeal, the least remainder of concern for myself, will be seen as a closure of a pre-existing opening. It will be seen as a refusal of the orientation to which the Good has invited us, without compelling us since, as we have seen, the Good is only good because it does not take possession of us, because it “inspires” (OB 140ff) us without becoming our master. And it is in order to safeguard this distinction between the holiness of the Good that liberates us and the *ecstatic* obsession of the sacred that strips us of our position, our *stasis*, that Levinas must simultaneously recognize and deny the possibility of keeping silent: “The will is free to assume this responsibility in whatever sense it likes; it is not free to refuse this responsibility itself; it is not free to ignore the meaningful world into which the face of the Other has introduced it” (TI 218–219). To be able to keep silent means: to be able to disregard the appeal, to not have to take it up. But, as Levinas will insist, this presupposes that it has already been heard: “The being that expresses itself imposes itself, but does so precisely by appealing to me with its destitution and nudity – its hunger – *without my being able to be deaf to that appeal*” (TI 200). It is from this hearing before one has chosen to listen, from this “unconditioned ‘Yes’ of submission” (OB 122), that Levinas will derive his “true universality” – a universality that has its origin in an asymmetry *and therefore* in a hierarchy between Good and Evil. For there can be little doubt that what is at stake here, for Levinas, is this hierarchy. From the moment there is an appeal, “silence,” interiority and closure have an *ethical* significance: it is the “claim” of “*Evil*” to be “the contemporary, the equal, the twin, of the Good” (CPP 138).

This is a strong thesis, but one which is, for Levinas, unavoidable. It is the idea that my naturalness, my spontaneous and involuntary self-concern cannot *appear* without thereby immediately losing this naturalness and becoming the object of my free choice. Ethics is the *complete* submission of nature to the order of good and evil which breaks into that nature *from without*. This is why Levinas says, and tirelessly repeats, that ethics is a *liberation*. The face of the Other liberates me because it confronts me with the possibility of choosing something which, left to myself, I could never have chosen. One only becomes human when one’s existence is no longer *conatus*, no longer something working behind one’s back, but choice, in

other words, "morality": true humanization comes from the Other, i.e. from the invitation to place, above my own existence, something else – the existence of the Other. Hence, for Levinas, what defines the humanity of man is his ability to sacrifice. Man is the sort of being who can reject his being, "reverse" his *conatus* (OB 70) and sacrifice himself: "To discover in the I such an orientation is to identify the I and morality" (TrO 353).

Such an identification is only possible for Levinas if he can refer to something that would bring into the I, from the outside, this orientation against naturalness, against *conatus essendi*. And this outside which is so much outside that it can enter the I without becoming part of it – and which owes its *orientational power* precisely to this refusal to participate in the I or to let the I participate in it – this outside is the Good, or the idea of the Infinite, whose trace is the face of the Other. By being a trace of this idea, the face of the Other can make an appeal to me that I cannot take possession of (since the face overflows the form lying within my reach) but which *dispossesses* me, because I cannot not hear it and because, from the moment I have heard it, the naturalness of my being shows up only to immediately "take its leave." The face effects a phenomenological reduction that does not add a dimension to my being, but takes one away. The feeling of shame with which I react to the gaze of the Other does not concern the fact that, with this gaze, I receive a nature and with the purity of my *pour soi* lose the absoluteness of my freedom. According to Levinas, and contrary to Sartre,³⁸ I am ashamed not so much of the nature that I become, but of the nature that I was. The gaze of the Other does not enslave; it liberates. And it liberates because there is no way for me to transcend it without already submitting to it. Keeping silent is merely a refusal to speak. It is merely the expression of a *im-passibility* that Levinas can only treat as a shortcoming, and hence as "egoism or Evil" (CPP 137) – but this link can only be made if one can rely on a universe which is also an *univers de discours* that has ascribed *all possible* discourse a place within it. And for Levinas, there is such a universe. For there is a word that "one cannot not hear, to which one cannot not answer" (*supra*). It is through the operation of this word – "God" – that the ethical situation becomes, for Levinas, a religious situation: "a situation in which the subject finds it impossible to hide," "an exceptional situation in which one is always before the face of the Other" and, let us note, "*where there is nothing private*".³⁹ I would like for a moment to consider, in concluding, what would happen if one would put this word out of operation. I would even go so far as to start from one place – but it is a central one – where Levinas unexpectedly seems to have put this word out of operation himself, although apparently without realizing it and without drawing the necessary consequences. And it is perhaps not without importance that, at the very moment when he was offered the opportunity to free himself from Sartre, he let it pass.

The ethical dignity of the Other

But why should Levinas have taken such an opportunity? Did he still need it? Have we not just seen that the simple introduction of an ethical factor had enabled Levinas to exorcise the entire Sartrean universe? For if the Other is not only outside me, but also above me, then he is not just "another freedom," irreconcilable with mine, who need only look at me to transcend my freedom and make me an object in the world, just as I, in turn, can make him an object in the world by looking at him and transcending his transcendence. This whole endless aporia which turns Sartre's description of intersubjective relations into that hell where "love" boils down to a choice between sadism (the Other is an object) or masochism (I am an object for the Other) seems to fall apart from the moment one realizes that "the Other is not transcendent because he would be free as I am" (TI 87), but that this transcendence points to a "superiority" (*ibid.*) which makes his gaze "incomparable" (TI 86) to mine, allowing him to give me the "bad conscience" of a freedom that is not just transcended but qualified, a freedom that is ashamed of being still too much nature, the freedom of "a tree that grows without regard for everything it suppresses and breaks, grabbing all the nourishment, air and sun" (DF 100). It is shame – shame for the "arbitrariness" and "injustice" of a freedom that was mere *conatus* – which chastens me, turns me into a moral being and, according to Levinas, gives me the possibility of carrying out that *metanoia* which, it is true, Sartre mentioned,⁴⁰ but conspicuously failed to articulate.

In order for this chastening to occur, there must be a "disproportion"⁴¹ between the Other and me, a disproportion referred to by Levinas when he says that the Other is "closer to God than I" (*supra*): "for me to feel myself to be unjust I must measure myself against the infinite" (CPP 58). But that infinite which provides me with a measure does not, as we know, show itself to me directly. It comes to me in the face of the Other which appeals to me, and it lends that face the force needed for an "*ethical* resistance:" to ignore the imperative of that face means, as was pointed out above, to let oneself be judged by it. This is why it is crucial for Levinas to maintain a distinction between the face of the Other and what I can see of the Other. Only if the Other is *more* than this form that I see, only if there is something about him by which he finds his meaning in himself and can thus always question the meaning I give to him, can there be any talk of an ethical resistance and an injustice that I commit against him by reducing his face to its form. And in the course of making this crucial distinction, Levinas takes the *further* crucial decision to link that "surplus" of the face over its form – that "something extra" by which the face can break through the form which manifests it – with the idea of the infinite: "The idea of infinity, the infinitely more contained in the less, is concretely produced in the form of a relation with the face. And the idea of infinity alone maintains the exteriority of the

other with respect to the same, despite this relation" (TI 196). While, for Levinas, the form is only an exteriority that turns toward me, thereby becoming involved with my interiority, the exteriority of the face is, through the idea of infinity, ab-solute: "a face is the unique openness in which the signifyingness of the trans-cendent does not nullify the transcendence and make it enter into an immanent order" (CPP 103). In order to have this status, then, the face must be *completely independent* of form; although it manifests itself in form, this form can in no way affect or "touch" it. Hence the face, even before entering into the form that manifests it, must already have withdrawn from it: a "supreme anachronism" that Levinas calls "trace," yet which he notes is not "simply a word," but "the proximity of God in the face of my neighbor".⁴² Without this proximity of a "God who passed" (CPP 106), i.e. without this "abdication" of the Good that has always already withdrawn from the desire which it awakens and which orients that desire toward my neighbor(s), the face would not be independent of form: "The supreme presence of a face is inseparable from this supreme and irreversible absence" which Levinas calls "God" or "He" or "*illeity* of the third person" (CPP 104). A "face, wholly open, can at the same time be in itself because it is in the trace of *illeity*" (CPP 106).

Without this independence of the face with respect to form – without this autarky – the otherness of the Other could not be ab-solute. And without this ab-solute foreignness that the face has by virtue of its being in the trace of the *illeity* of a God who passed, it could not impose its rights on me nor put up any (ethical) resistance against my attempt to brush aside its appeal. But *if the ethical value of the Other is to be situated in the face*, if, in other words, the face is not dependent on "the form" or "the context" in order to be what it "is," if it is "*signification without a context*" (TI 23), manifestation "*over and beyond form*" (TI 66), "*not disclosure but revelation*" (TI 65–66), then how can Levinas at the same time call this autarky of the face, this "infinity of the Other," a "destitution" (TI 213)? How can something which "is not of the world" (TI 198), and which enters the world without ever becoming a part of it, at the same time *suffer* under "its absence from this world into which it enters" (TI 75)? How can Levinas call this absence from form, which is also called supreme presence and the condition for the alterity of the Other, an "exiling" (*ibid.*)? How can this strangeness that guarantees the alterity of the Other be, at the same time, "strangeness-destitution," "his condition of being stranger, destitute or proletarian" (*ibid.*)? Why does the nakedness of the face – which is naked because it exceeds form and whose status requires independence from form – why does this *glorious* nakedness extend "into the nakedness of the body that is cold" (*ibid.*)? How can Levinas say that the face is naked because it "breaks into the order of the world," that it is without context because it is "wrested from the context of the world"⁴³ and, at the same time, call this nakedness "a distress"

(CPP 96)? Does this mean that, contrary to what was suggested, the distress of the Other does have some "relation" to "the context" or "the form" from which his face was supposed to be independent? But can we then keep situating the ethical dignity of the Other in his face? Could it be that it is less independent from form than the analysis of the face that Levinas himself has given us might have led us to suspect?

Levinas, of course, could easily make room for this objection by pointing out that it is precisely through form that this ethical dignity is *ethical* – a dignity that *makes an appeal to me* – because it is through form that the Other is vulnerable. In order to keep his dignity, the other is dependent on my help; after all, I retain the possibility of reducing his face to its form – I can murder him – and it is this possibility that makes the "ethical resistance" of his face an ethical, not a real resistance.⁴⁴ The *dignity* of the Other, then, has to do with his face, but because that face cannot circumvent the form, from which it is nevertheless independent, this dignity is, *in concreto*, an *ethical* dignity.

And yet, this answer is hardly satisfying and passes over the problem I want to pose. For if Levinas calls the face "naked" and sees in this nakedness the "destitution" of the Other – in other words, the fact that he is not only "above me" but also "beneath me," that he not only commands but supplicates – he is alluding not only to the fact that the Other, as a concrete person, remains vulnerable in that form from which his face becomes detached in the very moment the form shines forth (CPP 96). For Levinas, this nakedness also alludes to a *lack of form*: "Stripped of its very form, a face is frozen in its nudity. It is a distress" (*ibid.*)⁴⁵ The nakedness Levinas has in mind *here* is precisely what the word says: a lack of clothing, in other words, a need for "form" or "context." But, once again, how can this face – which for Levinas is "living" because it "undoes the form" which would make it "adequate to the Same" and would "betray" and "alienate" its "exteriority" (TI 66) – how can this face which is a "bareness *without any cultural ornament*" suffer because of the absence of something from which it *already* withdrew, even *before* entering? And yet this is what Levinas suggests when he sees the nakedness of the Other as his destitution, calls the Other "fatherless," "stranger," "uprooted," and contrasts this lack of roots, home and a fatherland with my own situation: "To hear his destitution which cries out for justice is not to represent an image to oneself [to know the "form" of this destitution – R.V.], but is to posit oneself as responsible, *both as more and as less than the being that presents itself in the face*. Less, for the face . . . judges me . . . [and] comes from a dimension of height . . . More, for my position as *I* consists in being able to respond to this essential destitution of the Other, finding resources for myself. The Other who *dominates* me in his transcendence is thus the stranger . . . to whom I am obligated" (TI 215). To take up the appeal of that stranger, or

even already to receive that appeal (and, as we have seen, one cannot not hear it) means to be ashamed of one's own wealth, to experience one's own existence as a usurpation, to lose one's titles – in short, to be oneself uprooted and *dispossessed* by the appeal of the other who is uprooted, to cease being *pour soi* and to become completely *pour l'autre*, for the “altruism” in question here is “total.”⁴⁶ One will no doubt recall: “nothing private.” “The I in relationship with the infinite is an impossibility of stopping its forward march . . . it is, *literally*, not to have time to turn back. It is to be not able to escape responsibility, to not have a hiding place of interiority where one comes back into oneself, to march forward *without concern for oneself*” (CPP 98). Ethics is “without calculation, *for going on to infinity*” (CPP 72). Sacrifice becomes the norm and criterion for the approach of the Other.

A “conclusion” that both presupposes and implies that for Levinas the nature and definition of ethics do not *ultimately* depend upon the “destitution” of the Other, but upon what Levinas calls his “height” (i.e. the infinity of his face). The Other's destitution is infinite, thus asking an infinite sacrifice from me, *since this destitution comes from the face* – a face which Levinas has defined as always already being stripped of a form it has no need of and in which it cannot be at home precisely because of the infinity of being a face. Strange as it may sound, it seems that, by its very definition, there is nothing I can do to prevent such a face from being “frozen” for it lacks and will always lack that clothing or context or form that I apparently possess. Which is why, for Levinas, the essential uprootedness of the Other cannot but have my uprootedness as a consequence. Since the Other (by definition) “lacks” roots, in other words, something which, according to Levinas, I possess, he can never become rooted like me. Rather, I will have to become like he is by giving up in an *infinite* sacrifice the roots he does not have. And in that process, I will asymptotically approach my true humanity, for that ground to which I am attached, that attachment itself is, for Levinas, only a sign of my naturalness. Humanity, after all, “is not a forest” and the individual “is not a tree” (DF 23). Being uprooted is a humanization, a leaving nature behind. True universality: community of the uprooted.⁴⁷

But is one a stranger only when one has no roots? Is uprootedness always a “lack” of roots? – this strange lack which for Levinas, as we have seen, cannot really be a lack since it results from his definition of the face, which is infinite and therefore cannot really be in need of a form that is too small, too finite, to contain it. *But what if what Levinas insists on treating as a “lack” of roots were really an “excess”?* Might there not also be an uprootedness that comes from an excess of roots, an excess that is yet *not enough* to be rooted like a tree? Does the difference between a man and a tree lie in the absence or presence of roots, as Levinas suggests, *or in the nature of the rootedness itself?* What is the cold that makes the face freeze? What, finally, is the destitution of the Other?

The nakedness that makes a difference

Let me try to make these questions and this suggestion of an alternative somewhat more concrete by coming back to the opposition which regulates all of Levinas's thought and which, *in the final analysis*, amounts to an ethicization of Sartre's dualism. Levinas does not deny that the Other has a "form" by which I can "perceive" him, nor that I can encounter him in a context where he fulfills a certain role and is situated by this role, the context of a culture for example. What he opposes is that the Other would be reduced to this form, context or culture, for then he would lose his alterity and be swallowed up by something which I can know, which "appears" to me. If the Other is only "in a cultural whole and is illuminated by this whole, as a text by its context," then understanding the Other would be "a hermeneutics and an exegesis" (CPP 95). To avoid this, Levinas wants the Other *also* to have its "own meaning" that would not depend on "this meaning received from the world" (*ibid.*) but that would disrupt it. To avoid what he perceives as the danger of contextualism – be it in the guise of relativism or of culturalism – the worldly (mundane) meaning of the Other must be thrown off balance by "another presence that is abstract (or, more exactly, absolute) and not integrated into the world" (*ibid.*). This other meaning – which, both for Sartre and Levinas, comes from "*au-dela du monde*," and which both call "infinite" – is for Levinas the face, a face which he calls "ab-stract" because it "disturbs immanence without settling into the horizons of the world" (CPP 102). Because the face is *independent* of world, context and culture, because it comes from an "elsewhere . . . into which it already withdraws" (*ibid.*) even before it arrives, Levinas sees in it a guarantee that the Other is more than a "cultural meaning" who approaches me from out of his cultural whole. Ethics, therefore, must *precede* culture: as face, the Other is an "*abstract man*," in the sense of someone "disengaged from all culture" (CPP 101).

But doesn't this ethics begin too late? Isn't there something that precedes it, something that it wanted to suppress but that ultimately returns and disrupts its analysis? What seems to be taken for granted in this entire discussion is precisely the opposition between infinite and finite, face and form, transcendent and immanent, uprootedness and rootedness, an opposition that seems to undergo slippage when Levinas states that the face, "stripped of its form," and hence in all its nakedness, is "frozen" (*supra*). Has the shivering of this nakedness, this destitution, really been understood when one forces it into the above oppositions and clings to the alternative: "either swallowed up by context like a thing, or without context, hence a person"? In other words: either *en soi* or *pour soi*, either mundane or transcendent, either visible form or "invisible" face – oppositions all of which Sartre made already and which, despite all his criticism of Sartre, seem also to govern Levinas's definition of the Other. But does the Other's destitution

allow itself to be forced into these oppositions? What if this destitution would consist of the Other being stuck with something that he can neither get free of nor dissolve into? Isn't that, for example, the relation one has with one's "ground," in its literal or metaphorical sense – the ground, for instance, of one's history, or of one's culture or one's personal life? Wasn't it Levinas himself who said that "the great 'experiences' of our life have properly speaking never been lived [*vécus*]" (CPP 68), and isn't it exactly this inability to fully live these moments that gives them, for every one of us, a surplus of meaning? Isn't it precisely this inability to work through moments which for others perhaps were insignificant, since they could work through them; isn't it precisely this inability to forget, this recollection *despite ourselves*, that singularizes us? Isn't it this, this unassimilable strangeness, that makes us different from trees and from things, but also from one another?

What I am suggesting, then, is that there is a nakedness that cannot be thought if one adheres to the opposition between face and form, finite and infinite. The nakedness of a being which is attached to "something" that *it cannot do away with nor even less have access to*.⁴⁸ Such a being is naked in the double sense of having not enough "form" to clothe itself in, and yet too much "form" not to notice its nakedness. Of course, Levinas is correct when he draws our attention to the violence involved in fully clothing a person with that "form" that he presents to us, and he deserves praise for warning us of the temptation to let the Other be absorbed and determined by the functional, everyday context in which we meet him. But in averting this danger, he seems to have made an overcorrection, one that consists in fully detaching the person's dignity from this "form" or context and hence reducing his nakedness to only the first of the two senses mentioned above. To make the dignity of the Other depend on this "visitation" or on this "revelation of the other . . . in the gaze of man aiming at a man precisely as abstract man, *disengaged from all culture*" (CPP 101) means perhaps that one ascribes, unwittingly and with the best of intentions, a dignity to the Other that ignores his true destitution, and the full extent of his nakedness. Might it not be that the true nakedness of the Other has less to do with his being disengaged from all culture, all context, all form, and more to do with his being engaged in it in such a way that the engagement never renders its secret to him? Isn't the Other not only an Other to me, but also someone who owes his "own" alterity to some "Thing" which remains "other" to him and yet singularizes him at the same time?

In other words, perhaps the Other is, *like myself*, primarily a "stranger" not because he is without those roots that I possess, but because we are both attached to "something" which is too close to leave us indifferent, but not close enough to be called our possession. Isn't it this structure that makes us similar to one another at the very moment when it distinguishes us? But the Other would then be decentered *like me*. And yet he would be an Other

precisely because that vague debt which he must discharge is still not “vague” enough to let it coincide with mine. And isn’t that the reason he “bears” a name – in the sense which connotes an *effort* – that is different from mine? Where is the Other more naked than in his name – a name that he does not possess, but has received; a name that he does not coincide with, but that can neither leave him indifferent; a name that summons him to life, but that will also survive him? In other words, what I am suggesting here, and will have to further develop elsewhere, is that one misconstrues the Other’s ethical dignity when one thinks of it in terms of the opposition between a face that is a “living present” and a form that sucks the life out of that present and “congeals” it (TI 66). The dignity and destitution of the Other do not have to be thought on the basis of that face that speaks and in which “the revealer” “coincides” with “the revealed” (TI 67). The destitution of the Other seems rather to reside in the fact that he is neither that presence of the face nor that absence of form, but someone caught in a tension between face and form that must be thought of in such a way that they *precede* this opposition – which, ultimately, is the opposition between exteriority and interiority, infinity and totality.

To work this out would require, among other things, a different ontology than the one with which Levinas is arguing, whose traces, despite all the criticism, he still carries with him. And perhaps the problem of the name could point the way to this new ontology. For a being who bears a name cannot be grasped in the categories of *pour soi*, *en soi* and *pour autrui* that Levinas provides with an ethical meaning. The name to which someone is attached *without the meaning of this attachment ever being clear to the person* might itself be an example of that tension that seems to precede the opposition between face and form. To have a name is to be-in-the-world by being, first and foremost, “present” to “something” in the world – a certain sound, a privileged signifier – which is nearby but, at the same time, at a distance. To have a name is, in this way, an example of all those forms of *en soi pour soi* where the subject is already attached to something even before it could have chosen it, and which, for that reason, precedes the opposition between *en soi* and *pour soi*.⁴⁹ But this is a privileged example because the name, like the Good for Levinas, is not sacred but holy. There is something about the name which, like the Good, turns me away from itself and directs me toward others. And ethics must be about this turning away, this *metanoia*. Yet there is also something about the name that escapes this turning and cannot be consoled by it: that which escapes discourse, punctuating it with a silence that no word can break. I think it is not only a mistake to try and force that silence by naming it with a word that one cannot not hear and – important qualification – by making that word do ethical work. I think it is also dangerous because one will then run the risk of closing off the only source from which we could draw in an attempt to extinguish the flames of that fire which is slowly but steadily burning away everything in us that

points to the possibility of a common humanity that would not need to pay the price of universality in order to avoid the folly of blind particularity.

Notes

* A first Dutch version of this text appeared in *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie* 1995 (57: 4). I wish to thank Dale Kidd for his help in translating this text. This work has been supported by the Belgian National Fund for Scientific Research.

- 1 This is an ironical reference to a Dutch book I published in 1990 on Foucault's use of quotation marks (such as in "human 'sciences'"), and which was recently translated as: *Michel Foucault: Genealogy as Critique*, London, 1995. On Heidegger's quotation marks, see: J. Derrida, *De l'esprit: Heidegger et la question*, Paris, 1987.
- 2 Cf. J. Lacan's intervention in the discussion following Foucault's "What is an Author?": "structuralism or not, it seems to me it is nowhere a question, in the field vaguely determined by that label, of the negation of the subject. It is a question of the dependence of the subject, which is quite different . . ." (*Bulletin de la Société française de Philosophie*, 1969 (64), p. 104).
- 3 For both of the following questions which were inspired by Foucault's work, and which have to do with the transition from an "archaeological" to a "genealogical" approach, see my: "Fascination with Foucault: Object and Desire of an Archaeology of Our Knowledge," *Angelaki*, 1994(1: 3 – Reconsidering the Political), pp. 113–118, in which I turn the idea of decentering elaborated here against a rather common fascination for Foucault's work.
- 4 An expression which comes up regularly in Lyotard's more recent work (cf. the references in my: "Dissensus Communis: How to remain silent after Lyotard," in P. Van Haute and P. Birmingham (eds). *Dissensus Communis: Between Ethics and Politics*, Kampen (The Netherlands), 1995, pp. 7–30. The considerations about "silence" that follow are intended as a provisional development of the problematic presented there).
- 5 For example: E. Levinas, *Time and the Other*, (trans. R. A. Cohen), Pittsburgh PA, 1987; ID., *Existence and Existents*, (trans. A. Lingis), The Hague, 1978.
- 6 J-F. Lyotard, "Grundlagenkrise," *Neue Reife für Philosophie*, 1986, pp. 1–33.
- 7 Cf. the title of the penultimate chapter of his controversial *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, Cambridge, 1990: "An Alternative Way out of the Philosophy of the Subject: Communicative versus Subject-Centred Reason."
- 8 In any case, much longer than is possible here – a promissory note that, I hope, will incur the clemency of those who will object, with some irritation, that many of the important Levinasian themes (the *il y a*, the third person, justice, etc.) are not discussed here. One must begin somewhere.
- 9 I am citing the brochure for the symposium, "Interpretaties van subjectiviteit" (= "Interpretations of Subjectivity"), where this text was first presented (University of Amsterdam, April 1995).
- 10 Levinas calls the word "God" the "first word" in, among other places, "Language and Proximity," in ID., *Collected Philosophical Papers*, (trans. A. Lingis), Dordrecht etc., 1987, pp. 125–126. I shall be referring to this work by CPP. Levinas's other texts will be quoted as follows, using the English translations when available: DF: *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, (trans. S. Hand), Baltimore, 1990; DQI: *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée*, Paris, 1992 (édition de poche); TI: *Totality and Infinity*, (trans. A. Lingis), Dordrecht etc., 1991; TrO: "The

- Trace of the Other," in M. C. Taylor (ed.) *Deconstruction in Context: Literature and Philosophy*, Chicago/London, 1986, pp. 345–59. On some occasions I also refer by AE to the French original of OB: *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*, Dordrecht etc., 1988. All italics are my own.
- 11 On this distinction, cf. Dieter Henrich's brilliant piece: "Ethik der Autonomie," in ID., *Selbstverhältnisse*, Stuttgart, 1982, p. 14 and *passim*.
 - 12 J.-F. Lyotard, "Levinas' Logic," in ID., *The Lyotard Reader*, (ed. A. Benjamin), Oxford, 1989, p. 297.
 - 13 For a perspicuous overview, cf. D. Henrich, *art. cit.*
 - 14 J. Habermas, "Morality and Ethical Life," in ID., *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, Cambridge, 1990, p. 197 and cf. p. 66.
 - 15 J.-F. Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, Manchester U.P., 1988, nr. 176 (I will henceforth refer to this work as "D", followed by the number of the paragraph being cited). Habermas is not mentioned in this passage, but he is clearly the target.
 - 16 J. Habermas, *op. cit.*, pp. 197–8. Habermas sees here a possibility of working Kant's *Faktum der Vernunft* into communicative theory – clearly this implies a distancing from Kant that does not contradict the symmetry noted here, but qualifies it to a significant extent.
 - 17 Cf. the very title of Levinas's collection *Humanisme de l'autre homme* (= *Humanism of the Other Man*), Paris, 1972; cf. also OB 128 (ordinary humanism is "not human enough"). For his part, Lyotard discusses humanism in *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, Cambridge, 1991.
 - 18 Besides the work just mentioned, cf. especially *Lectures d'enfance*, Paris, 1991 (specifically the exordium on the idea of "infancy"), and *Moralités postmodernes*, Paris, 1993.
 - 19 J.-F. Lyotard, "The Grip," in ID., *Political Writings*, Minneapolis, 1993, pp. 148–58. Lyotard refers here to the etymological origin of "mancipium:" "Manceps is the person who takes hold, in the sense of possession or appropriation. And *mancipium* refers to this gesture of taking hold . . . we are held by the grasp of others since childhood, yet our childhood does not cease to exercise its *mancipium* even when we imagine ourselves to be emancipated . . . we are born before we are born to ourselves. And thus we are born of others, but also born to others . . . subjected to their *mancipium* which they themselves do not comprehend. For they are themselves children . . ." (pp. 148–49 *partim*).
 - 20 I have tried elsewhere to explain the price of this restriction and why, in this way, one makes it too easy on oneself, overlooking the real problem of the so-called relativism of Habermas' opponents (Foucault, Heidegger, etc.): "Habermas on Heidegger and Foucault: Meaning and Validity in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*," *Radical Philosophy*, 1992 (61), pp. 15–22; "Transcultural Vibrations," *Ethical Perspectives*, 1994(1: 2), pp. 89–100, esp. 94–95.
 - 21 For Lyotard, a differend, as explained elsewhere ("Dissensus Communis," *supra* note 4), is a dispute between two parties that cannot be settled for lack of a common idiom or, I would add in light of Lyotard's recent writings, for lack of any idiom *at all* – a lack of which the assertion "it is like this because it is like this" seems to be a symptom.
 - 22 J.-F. Lyotard, "Levinas' Logic," *art. cit.*, p. 307.
 - 23 D, nr. 206 (cf. nrs. 144, 145, 162, 164 . . .)
 - 24 The characterization of Levinas's ethics as "postmodern," introduced by Marc-Alain Ouaknin in his *Méditations Erotiques. Essai sur Emmanuel Levinas*, (Paris, 1992) and taken over by Z. Bauman in his *Postmodern Ethics* (Oxford, 1995, e.g. p. 84) is, I believe, profoundly misleading. Surely one is doing an

injustice by painting black perhaps the only cow that stands out in the night of our present time.

- 25 Levinas would have no problem with this qualification – cf. for instance TI 210: “In positing the relation with the Other as ethical, one surmounts a difficulty that would be inevitable if, *contrary to Descartes*, philosophy started from a *cogito* that would posit itself absolutely independently of the Other. For the Cartesian *cogito* is discovered, at the end of the Third Meditation, to be supported on the certitude of the divine existence *qua infinite*, by relation to which the finitude of the *cogito*, or the doubt, is posited and conceivable. This finitude could not be determined without recourse to the infinite, *as is the case in the moderns* . . .” Cf. also Derrida: “But by the force of a movement proper to Levinas, he accepts this extreme ‘modern’ audacity only to redirect it toward an infinitism that this audacity itself must suppose, according to himself; and the form of this infinitism is often quite classical, pre-Kantian rather than Hegelian” (*Writing and Difference*, London, 1978, p. 104).
- 26 An expression that crops up regularly in OB and that, interestingly enough, also gives the title to a brief article in Lyotard’s *Moralités postmodernes* (chap. 12).
- 27 P. Van Haute, “‘Fatal Attraction’: Jean Laplanche on Sexuality, Subjectivity and Singularity in the Work of Sigmund Freud,” in *Radical Philosophy*, 1995 (nr. 73), pp. 5–12. In his conclusion the author adopts the terminology from the article mentioned in note 3, and thus indirectly poses the problem of whether it is correct to consider his analysis as an ontic filling of an ontological base structure (e.g. note 19 above). But even if he would not object to his analyses being used as support for an ontological base structure *that Levinas never takes account of*, one might still expect Levinas to ask if every enigma refers back to the sexual/erotic enigma described by Van Haute, and if there isn’t an asymmetry between that register and the register of the Infinite which provokes metaphysical Desire.
- 28 In this and the following sentence, I refer to a number of ideas from Lacan’s important seventh seminar: *L’éthique de la psychanalyse* (1959–1960) (Paris, 1986, esp. p. 361 – “tragique” – and *passim*). What Lacan means by “*ne pas céder sur son désir*” is explained, although with other (not insignificant) accents, in: R. Bernet, “Le sujet devant la loi (Lacan et Kant),” and P. Moyaert, “Sur la sublimation chez Lacan: Quelques remarques,” both in S. G. Lofts and P. Moyaert (eds). *La pensée de Jacques Lacan: Questions historiques, Problèmes théoriques*, Louvain/Paris, 1994. In this seminar Lacan repeatedly uses words such as *graviter* or *tourner autour de* (“gravitate around”) to indicate our (decentered) position with respect to *das Ding* (*op. cit.*, pp. 72, 77 . . .).
- 29 For this expression, see Jacob Rogozinski’s excellent “Vers une éthique du différend,” in H. Kunneman and H. De Vries (eds). *Enlightenments: Encounters between Critical Theory and Contemporary French Thought*, Kampen (The Netherlands), 1993, pp. 92–119, esp. p. 102.
- 30 For a lucid presentation of the way this link is severed in Lacan and Freud: P. Moyaert, *Ethiek en sublimatie: Over de ethiek van de psychoanalyse van Jacques Lacan*, Nijmegen, 1994.
- 31 TI 198: “The Other is the sole being I can wish to kill.”
- 32 CPP 72: “To the idea of the infinite only an extravagant response is possible. There has to be a ‘thought’ that understands more than it understands . . . a ‘thought’ which, in this sense, could go beyond its death . . . To go beyond one’s death is to sacrifice oneself. The response to the enigma’s summons is the generosity of sacrifice outside the known and the unknown, *without calculation, for going on to infinity* . . . I approach the infinite *by sacrificing myself. Sacrifice is the norm and the criterion of the approach*” – a train of thought which is rigorously

- taken up in OB (1974) but, in light of the previous citation, in a way that is not completely foreign to the framework of TI (1961). But the readers of Levinas who see a *caesura* between TI and OB will, of course, disagree. They should, perhaps, reconsider.
- 33 It is the hesitation before this murder that, for Levinas, has hindered the development of a pluralistic ontology. But killing Parmenides means primarily the overthrow of ontology as *prima philosophia*, and henceforth deriving it from ethics. This is the very project of TI, which thus can be read as “totality or infinity.” Only the exteriority of infinity can bring a pluralism into being and prevent it from closing into the totality which, for Levinas, it would become if left to the devices of ontology. For this reason, one might use the following adage to describe Levinas’s metaphysics: “*bonum et dispersum convertuntur*” (cf. e.g. “The social relation engenders this surplus of the Good over being, multiplicity over the One” (TI 292)).
 - 34 OB 128: “The impossibility of escaping God, the adventure of Jonas [sic], indicates that God is at least here not a value among values (. . .) The impossibility of escaping God lies in the depths of myself as a self, as an absolute passivity (. . .) [as] the impossibility of slipping away (. . .) the birth (. . .) of a ‘being able to die’ *subject to sacrifice*”. The reader will perhaps recall the quote in note 32.
 - 35 Ethics, for Levinas, is a penetration (OB 49: “one-penetrated-by-the-other”) but, according to his recurrent formula, “*before eros*” (e.g. OB 192 n 27). A penetration, then, without the consolation nor even the fantasm of union, whose consequence is that the subject penetrated becomes an ever wider “opening” (“*ouverture*”) which can never contain or encompass what is always already inside without being absorbed by it, an opening which seems rather to be a hole through which interiority continually discharges itself: “It is always to empty oneself anew of oneself, to absolve oneself, like in a hemophiliac’s hemorrhage”: (OB 92) – a “hemorrhage” which already shows that Levinas, as we shall indicate later, is ethicizing the Sartrean universe all the while using Sartre’s own concepts and metaphors.
 - 36 E. Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe N  mo*, (trans. R. A. Cohen), Pittsburgh, 1985, p. 121.
 - 37 These terms are standard vocabulary in OB. They can be found on almost any page.
 - 38 J.-P. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, New York, esp. Part 3: “Being-for-Others.”
 - 39 E. Levinas, “Transcendence et Hauteur,” *Bulletin de la Soci  t   Fran  aise de Philosophie*, 1962 (54: 3), p. 110.
 - 40 *op. cit.*, p. 412n: “These considerations do not exclude the possibility of an ethics of deliverance and salvation. But this can be achieved only after a radical conversion which we cannot discuss here.” OB should be read as one long description of this process of conversion whose central – and never argued – premise would not have satisfied Sartre: the idea that the wound which the Other’s appeal not so much brands me with, but burns me with again, has a chastening effect.
 - 41 E. Levinas, “Signature,” in ID., *Difficile Libert  : Essais sur le juda  sme*, Paris, 1963¹, p. 326. (This version of “Signature” is not included in DF).
 - 42 E. Levinas, “Un Dieu Homme?,” in ID., *Entre Nous: Essais sur le penser-   l’autre*, Paris, 1991, p. 73.
 - 43 *Ibid.*
 - 44 On the distinction between an ethical and a real resistance: E. Levinas, “Freedom and Command,” CPP 15–23; and TI e.g. 199; OB 198n2.

- 45 Here I have altered the English translation which reads "paralyzed" for "*transi dans sa nudité*" (*Humanisme de l'autre homme*, o.c., p. 52). In preferring "frozen" to "paralyzed," I am following Adriaan Peperzak in his annotated Dutch translation of *Humanisme* (*Humanisme van de andere mens*, Kampen/Kapellen, 1990, p. 78, which paraphrases "*transi*" as "shivering with cold"). The change is not unimportant given the point I shall be making.
- 46 "Transcendance et Hauteur," *art. cit.*, p. 97.
- 47 Note that, according to Levinas, Christianity can for essential reasons only make an incomplete contribution to this universality: "If Europe had been spiritually uprooted by Christianity, as Simone Weil complains, the evil would not be great. And it is not always the idylls that have been destroyed by Europe's penetration of the world . . . but is Europe's unhappiness not due to the fact that Christianity did not sufficiently uproot it?" (DF 137). Though I hope to have made it clear from which standpoint I am myself arguing – but isn't it a surprising alliance? – in light of this quote (which is in no sense a *hapax*) one can only wonder at the success with which Levinas's ethics has been assimilated by certain moral theologians from the *Catholic* world (for a noteworthy exception: U. Dhondt, "Ethics, History, Religion: The Limits of the Philosophy of Levinas," in P. J. M. Van Tongeren, *et al.* (eds). *Eros and Eris: Contributions to a Hermeneutical Phenomenology. Liber Amicorum for Adriaan Peperzak*, Dordrecht, 1992, pp. 273–80).
- 48 Cf. the introduction to this article, where these two moments were used in defining the concept "decentering." As soon as one of these moments is relinquished, problems arise. Nationalism, for instance, rests on a misrecognition of this *double* structure of "decentering" in that it claims to *have access* to that "something" to which a nation is irrevocably "attached." In other words, the mistake is that it purports to be able to specify what I called in this article's introduction the "vague" debt. Nationalism pretends to know what "our" debt to the nation consists in. On the other hand, the stress on the *two* moments in decentering allows one, in principle, to steer away from an extreme cosmopolitan/universalistic correction to the mistake of nationalism/particularism, an overcorrection that consists of the claim that there is no singular attachment as such (and hence gives up decentering, "in-fantia" as such). In other words, "decentering" seems to point the way to an alternative position which is neither universalistic nor particularistic in the traditional sense. I shall leave it for another occasion to spell out the political consequences of this "third" way.
- 49 The endo-ontology which Merleau-Ponty was working on in *The Visible and the Invisible* can provide scant inspiration here. It is insensitive to the problem of singularity which we have indicated in the preceding lines. The thought of the chiasm and of the polymorphism of vertical Being ("*I'être brut*") can explain why we don't live in a *different* world, but seems able to conclude from this only that we live in the *same* world because it turns in the direction of an asubjective phenomenology, for which "the I-other problem is a *Western* problem" (*op. cit.*, Paris, 1964, p. 274). Cf. my article: "The Untouchable: Merleau-Ponty's last subject," forthcoming in *Epoché. A Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 1977(5:1).

FROM MAIEUTICS TO METANOIA

Levinas's understanding of the philosophical task

*Norman Wirzba*Source: *Man and World* 28 (1995): 129–44.

“The knowing whose essence is critique cannot be reduced to objective cognition; it leads to the Other (Autrui). To welcome the Other is to put in question my freedom.”¹

1.

In the teacher-student relation a number of crucial philosophical issues come into focus. Among these two of the most significant are the nature of philosophical exploration and the question of limits to potential claims for knowledge. If knowledge is readily available or easily had, presupposing with Descartes that potential knowers need only the proper method, then it is clear that the role of the teacher will be rather minimal – teachers must step aside after the method is understood so that the student can proceed to full knowledge. In this democratic view each person has equal access to the means whereby true and false judgments can be distinguished.

The situation, however, might be very different. It is also possible that the ascent to truth may be fraught with difficulties that are not easily overcome. Viewed this way the role of a teacher must be understood differently. Suddenly the teacher assumes special significance as the one who leads the learner through unfamiliar terrain. It is quite possible, as Kierkegaard suggested, that I as a potential knower am in a state of untruth, am perhaps even hostile to the truth, and therefore need the help of another to redirect me. Without a teacher, in other words, my claims to knowledge would appear either dogmatic or naive.

In *Totality and Infinity* and other texts Emmanuel Levinas has given us a trenchant description of the philosophical journey that brings the teacher-student relation to the fore. Put quite simply, without the Other

(*Autrui* – Levinas's term for the human other) who teaches me, claims to critical knowledge would be without basis. Levinas is not suggesting that the Other becomes the sure foundation for knowledge, as when Descartes claims such a foundation for the "I" who thinks. Rather, the Other can be my teacher only to the extent that he or she is transcendent with respect to me, overflows the categories by which I would make sense of him or her. The Other as teacher, then, does not leave me comfortable and secure with myself. Instead, another person redirects my path, introduces me to vistas previously unknown.

Levinas's 1957 essay "La philosophie et l'idée de l'Infini"² schematized the teacher-student relation in terms of the difference between autonomy and heteronomy. Autonomy bespeaks the confident relation I have with the world such that I can appropriate and integrate it in terms of the difference between autonomy and heteronomy. Autonomy bespeaks the confident relation I have with the world such that I can appropriate and integrate it in terms conformable and comfortable³ to myself. In the autonomous view there are no teachers, no occasions for the radical questioning of my appropriation and integration of the world. As examples of this autonomous conception Levinas frequently refers to Socratic maieutics and Descartes's description of the self-secure cogito. Heteronomy, however, presupposes one who has a relation with the "absolutely other," one who has an experience that "transports us beyond what constitutes our nature." Here teachers are of paramount importance because they are the condition for the possibility of my being opened beyond myself. Descartes caught sight of the formal structure of this teaching in his idea of the infinite. Levinas's own unique contribution, however, lies in his description of the "ethical relation" as the condition for the realization of this formal possibility.

In this essay I will lay out in some detail how the categories of autonomy and heteronomy play into a reconception of the teacher-student relation. Having completed this I will conclude with a discussion of how teaching is crucial for what Levinas calls critical knowledge. Critical knowing entails a movement from maieutics (autonomy) to the redirection of my freedom (metanoia) in the teaching of the Other.

2.

The classical, and also the most enduring, expression of autonomy is Socratic maieutics. In various dialogues Socrates is explicit about the fact that he is not a teacher. He is at best a spiritual midwife (*maia*), a helper who, as in the *Meno*, facilitates another's attempts to bring to light knowledge that was buried deep within. The *Theaetetus* gave programmatic expression to maieutics in the following:

I am so far like the midwife that I cannot myself give birth to wisdom . . . Those who frequent my company at first appear, some of them, quite

unintelligent, but, as we go further with our discussions, all who are favored by heaven make progress at a rate that seems surprising to others as well as to themselves, although it is clear that *they have never learned anything from me*. The many admirable truths they bring to birth have been discovered by themselves from within (150b-d – my emphasis).

Socrates does not desire disciples. Instead he refers all who come to him back to themselves, for it is within themselves that each will find what they are looking for.

In order to better understand maieutics we must link it with its twin doctrine, the doctrine of anamnesis.⁴ It only makes sense to turn prospective learners back to themselves if they do indeed have the resources and the means already at their disposal. This is what anamnesis suggests. In the *Meno* (81c-e) Socrates says there is nothing that the soul, because immortal, has not already learned. Unfortunately, much of what the soul once knew, though in a preexistent state, is now forgotten. The coming to knowledge would thus amount to a recovery of what is deep within me, an anamnesis or recollection.

What is decisive for Levinas about this picture of learning is the absence of teaching: “there is no teaching but recollection” (*Meno* 82a). The student engaged in philosophical exploration is finally alone, is a law unto him or herself (*autos-nomos*). To be sure, such a student is not alone in a physical sense – Socrates and other discussion partners may be in the vicinity, may even be asking questions. But, as Socrates himself says, the learner does not receive anything essential from anyone else, is not ever put into question. Being questioned and being put into question are not the same thing.

From this brief description of maieutics and anamnesis we can see the self-referential nature of autonomy. All claims to knowledge and truth must pass through the self, even if these claims are not finally reducible to that self. When engaged in conversation with others (Socrates’s mode of philosophical exploration) we quickly come to the realization that any conversation is successful to the extent that its elements conform to my own understanding. As my understanding changes, perhaps as the result of my being questioned, it does so only with reference to my prior understanding (when I say, “Now I understand” or “Now I see your point” it is a case of my seeing an aspect that I did not previously see but now can see because it has fallen within my frame of reference). If I could not rely on this prior understanding I would lose the ability to participate in a conversation altogether. Philosophical exploration, on the autonomous model, thus depends on the possibility of reality conforming to a pre-established frame of reference.

The doctrines of maieutics and anamnesis have imbued modern sensibilities to a remarkable degree. The “flight from authority” clearly evident since the time of Descartes, and entrenched by an Enlightenment ethos, presupposes that in matters of truth and knowledge we need not turn to any external sources. We are beholden only to ourselves because we are, in a

most fundamental way, familiar with the goals of our searches and our activities. T. S. Eliot, writing at the highpoint of modernism, expresses this familiarity well in his poem *Little Gidding*.

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.⁵

These lines express considerable confidence in the self as an explorer. This confidence may not be in the fruits that may result from the search – hence the distrust and critique evident in modernist writers. It resides, rather, in the unmistakable conviction that any possible success will bring the explorer back to him or herself.

Further confirmation of the vitality of the Socratic legacy can be found in contemporary hermeneutics. Heidegger, for instance, makes this clear in his comments on the “hermeneutic circle” – every interpretation already understands in some sense what is to be interpreted. The roots of this conception relate directly to his description of Dasein as a being (*Seiendes*) that “always already” has a pre-understanding (*Vorverständnis*) of Being (*Sein*). Gadamer continues and develops this conception when he notes that to ask a question is already to have a sense for the answer, even if this “sense” is subject to the dialectic of the yes and the no made possible by conversation.⁶ What descriptions of the philosophical journey such as these have in common is a view of the self as central and autonomous, a law unto itself.

What, in Levinas’s view, is central to an autonomous perspective? It is the presupposition that the thinking being understand itself as free. Levinas notes that since its origin philosophy has attempted to free itself from the tyranny of opinion (*PII*, 74/92). The danger of opinion is that it chains the philosophical traveler to the claims of others, to sophists who might actually claim to teach us something. Opinion necessitates attention to exteriority. Socrates’s mission, on the other hand, can be viewed as the medicinal art (spiritual midwifery) that will purify the soul of opinions that poison it. The path to *episteme* will not be a path via sophists but rather a journey through the self, through maieutic self-awakening.

In the *Phaedo* we see a clear indication of the thinker’s freedom. Socrates says, “I once heard someone reading from a book . . . asserting that it is mind that produces order and is the cause of everything. This explanation pleased me. Somehow it seemed right that mind should be the cause of everything” (97b-c). Later on he continues: “I first lay down the theory which I judge to be soundest, and then whatever seems to agree with it – with regard either to causes or to anything else – I assume to be true, and whatever does not I assume not to be true” (100a). In these lines the thinker is not beholden to an exteriority which might put into question the *theoria*

held to be true. Thought is "the inward dialogue carried on by the mind with itself" (*Sophist* 263e), or better yet, the monologue that insures the autonomy of the thinking self.

Autonomy is a prime example of what Levinas calls the philosophy of the "Same." Constitutive of all such philosophies is the attempt to integrate reality in terms of predetermined categories or concepts. These are the *theoria* Socrates spoke about. The intelligibility of the world, its being what it is, comes to rest upon whether or not it conforms to the monologue of the thinking soul. Whatever does not submit to this standard (self-imposed or self-validated) is rendered unintelligible and thus no longer worthy of concern. And since it is of no concern it need not trouble us. Autonomy, because it eliminates fear and worry, thus leaves us free. Levinas summarizes these tendencies in the following: "The 'I think,' thought in the first person, the soul conversing with itself or, qua reminiscence, rediscovering the teachings it receives, thus promote freedom" (*PII*, 75/94). And again: "This is Socrates' teaching when he leaves to the master only the exercise of maieutics: every lesson introduced into the soul was already in it. The I's identification, its marvelous autarchy, is the natural crucible of this transmutation of the Other (*Autre*) into the Same (*Même*)" (*PII*, 76/96).

As a philosophy of the Same autonomy seeks to identify the world, make it intelligible, via the mediating activity of self-referential thought. The thinking being, however, does not simply dismiss exteriority out of hand. Thought is always thought "about something." But what has happened in this thought is that the strangeness of exteriority has been dissimulated. Exteriority does not signify on its own. It awaits the arrival of the thinking self to give it meaning. Hence autonomy does not entail the elimination of otherness, but rather its muting via the activity of mediation.

Levinas acknowledges that mediation sits at the core of western philosophy (*TI*, 34/44). Without this activity philosophy would not be possible, for in order that something be thought at all it must be thought in terms of meaningful categories and concepts. Concepts and categories are the tools the philosopher uses to approach a reality that would otherwise be completely foreign. "The foreign being, instead of maintaining itself in the impregnable fortress of its singularity, instead of facing, becomes a theme and an object. It fits under a concept already or dissolves into relations. It falls into the network of a priori ideas, which I bring to bear so as to capture it" (*PII*, 76/97).

We can see in this description that Levinas cannot be wholly opposed to the activity of mediation. If he were, then he would be reduced to silence.⁷ Levinas's complaint, however, resides elsewhere. It lies in the uncritical adoption of mediation as a sufficient tool for philosophical exploration. When philosophers assume an autonomous position they are suggesting that the activity of mediation cannot be put into question. Because the thinking being cannot be taught, it is impossible that the categories or

concepts through which that being integrates the world can ever be challenged. Because the unintelligible is of no concern it cannot seriously trouble intelligibility.

By highlighting the self-referential nature of mediation we are now prepared to see what Levinas finds objectionable in autonomous approaches to knowledge and truth, namely their violence and their naïveté. Autonomy is violent because reality is forced to play a role, assume a position, within a conceptual schema not derivable from itself (*PII*, 76/98). The world, in the activity of mediation, is recast in a mold not of its own making. In *Totality and Infinity* Levinas noted that the “mode of depriving the known being of its alterity can be accomplished only if it is aimed at through a third term, a neutral term, *which itself is not a being*; in it the shock of the encounter of the same with the other is deadened. This third term may appear as a concept thought” (*TI*, 32/42 – my emphasis). Third terms provide the interpretive keys that allow us to transform unintelligibility into intelligibility, allow us to identify the world as part of a meaningful whole. What is to be noted, however, is Levinas’s contention that the formation of third terms or concepts corresponds to the freedom of an autonomous being. This is why he says third terms are not themselves beings. Concepts are not part of the world that we comprehend. They are, rather, the means through which the world can be comprehended. And since they do not come from the world, they must be supplied by the thinking being. Hence the thinking being’s autonomy with respect to the world.

It is not difficult to see how this account of mediation leads to an intelligibility that is open to the charge of naïveté. Since the world has been subdued, made comprehensible, by the free activity of the thinking being, there is little room for the means of comprehension itself to be put into question. The radically other, as we have seen, has been dissimulated via a sometimes benign violence and thus cannot speak for itself. If the world depends on mediation for its intelligibility, how can mediation itself ever be brought into question? Would not unintelligibility have to “register” in some way such that the security of intelligibility would be shaken? Put another way, how can the framework of autonomy be put into question if the conditions for a meaningful reality are established solely through the activity of a self-referential being? Perhaps we are now better able to understand why Socrates, after searching high and low, could not find a single teacher (*Meno* 89e, 96b-c).

3.

It is tempting to view Levinas’s description of heteronomy as the mere opposite of autonomy. If autonomy is the law of the self, and heteronomy is the law of the other, is this not a clear case of binary opposition in which self is pitted against other? When gone at it this way we come to see, as

John Caputo has, the self and other as representing "sides" of a position, perhaps the sides of alterity and altruism.⁸ A closer reading of Levinas, however, reveals that talk about sides with respect to the self and the Other is entirely inappropriate. In part this stems from Levinas's refusal to understand the Other in objectivist terms. In *Totality and Infinity* he writes: "the sense of our whole effort is contest the ineradicable conviction of every philosophy that objective knowledge is the ultimate relation of transcendence, that the Other (though he be different from the things) must be known objectively . . ." (TI, 89/89). Heteronomy is not the opposite of autonomy, not even its outright rejection. We do better if we understand it as the interruption, the putting into question, or the teaching of autonomy.

If we are to entertain the possibility of a genuine heteronomy then it must also be the case that Socrates was mistaken in his claim that there is no teaching but only recollection. How is teaching possible? For starters we will need to appreciate that teaching depends on a conception of transcendence, a conception of alterity which somehow exceeds the self-referential nature of maieutics. Levinas finds an instance of this possibility in a surprising text, namely Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy*. It is surprising because Descartes gives autonomy one of its most powerful modern formulations in the self-certainty of the *cogito*.

Descartes's path of methodic doubt is well-known. Having secured himself as a thinking thing he next inquires into the veracity of other ideas. All other ideas, he notes, may simply be the product of an inventive mind, part of the soul's dialogue with itself. Except one. In the third *Meditation* Descartes comes upon the idea of God, the idea of the infinite, and concludes that this is an idea that could not have sprung from himself. Indeed, it cannot be made sense of in terms of self-reference. Though he himself is a finite substance, "this would not account for my having the idea of an infinite substance, when I am finite, unless this idea proceeded from some substance which really was infinite." By saying that the idea does not proceed from himself but from the infinite Descartes suggests that he cannot account for the idea, either in terms of its source or its legitimacy, by himself. As Levinas puts it: "It has been *put (mise)* into us. It is not a reminiscence" (PII, 81/107).

Unlike Descartes, Levinas is not interested in proving the existence of God. What interests him about this argument is the structure of thought it reveals. Descartes suggests that in the idea of the infinite we find a thought which, as Levinas puts it, "thinks more than it thinks (*pense plus qu'elle ne pense*)" (TI, 56/62). In thinking the idea of the infinite thought thinks an overflow or an excess which itself does not fall within a thought (understood self-referentially). The failure of self-referential thought to comprehend the infinite does not stem from weakness or a lack within the thinking being. Rather, comprehension is out of place from the start because the infinite is not an object to be comprehended. The transcendence of the infinite, its

exceeding the powers of self-referential thought, must be understood as the distance that separates idea and ideatum. "The distance that separates *ideatum* and idea here constitutes the content of the *ideatum* itself" (TI, 41/49).

Normally the distance between an idea and its ideatum, that which the idea is about, is overcome via the mediation of concepts and categories. In the idea of the infinite, however, the distance remains as the non-adequation or the disproportionality of idea and ideatum. As soon as one thinks one has understood the infinite, i.e., mediated it in terms that make sense to me, then one has failed to understand. This is why Levinas refers to the infinite in terms of its "infinition." "The idea of infinity is the mode of being, the *infinition*, of infinity. Infinity does not first exist, and *then* reveal itself. Its infinition is produced as revelation, as a positing of its idea in *me*" (TI, 12/26). The infinite is not an object, but is the mode of non-adequation between idea and ideatum. The focus here is plainly on the way of thinking rather than what thinking may be about. This "way" Levinas calls desire without need, desire that intensifies as the distance between idea and ideatum increases. Levinas calls this mode of thinking "transcendence" (TI, 24/35).

In the idea of the infinite Descartes came upon a thinking that, while steeped in the structures of autonomy, can be described as heteronomous. The *cogito* is not the secure foundation it was first made out to be. It is not sufficient unto itself with respect to all ideas. "The *cogito* in Descartes rests on the other who has put the idea of infinity in the soul, who had taught it, and has not, like the Platonic master, simply aroused the reminiscence of former visions" (TI, 85/86). The idea of the infinite, rather than it being the mere opposite or negation of the finite, is an idea defined by distance. As such it cannot enter my familiar world, become a part of my frame of reference. It exceeds my autonomous powers.

Levinas finds in the "ethical relation" the realization of what in Descartes is only a formal possibility. "The idea of the infinite is the social relationship" (PII, 81/108). The other person is the condition for the possibility of heteronomy because people, unlike other things, can resist the "ruses of thought" and put into question the freedom of autonomy. How is it, however, that people should be capable of this? Is it not plainly the case that people often do submit to the pre-established structures of an alien thought? Obviously people do succumb to the dictates of others. Hegel's account of the master-slave relationship gives a powerful description of precisely this sort of domination. But if we understand Levinas's account of the Other along these lines we shall surely miss his point. The Other is not an alter-ego against whom I might take up arms. To understand the relation between self and Other this way is to view the Other as an object and not as transcendent, as my teacher.

Heteronomy and teaching do not come to pass via the kind of resistance constituted by an objective understanding of the world. The Other does not teach me because the Other is somehow a force I must reckon with (if that

were all teaching amounted to I would not find my autonomy seriously questioned – it would at best be challenged and prompted to greater strength). Rather, the Other presents me with a different kind of resistance, a resistance Levinas calls ethical. “The infinite paralyzes power by its infinite resistance to murder, which, firm and insurmountable, gleams in the face of the Other, in the total nudity of his defenceless eye, in the nudity of the absolute openness to the Transcendent. There is here a relation not with a very great resistance, but with something absolutely *other*: the resistance of what has no resistance – the ethical resistance” (TI, 217/199). To understand this passage we must recall earlier comments about transascendence, the structure of a thought characterized as desire. The Other is not an object but a distance revealed in the non-adequation between my idea of the Other and the Other itself. Levinas refers to the Other as naked and destitute because none of the attributes I would ascribe to him or her stick. The Other is a “gaping whole,” an openness that is absolute. As absolute the Other “absolves” him or herself from the *Sinngebungen* I would employ to comprehend.

Obviously, and in most cases, the meaning I bestow on another person is not ever challenged. As I live with others I make sense of them in terms or categories that make sense to me. Levinas’s point, however, is that the Other is not finally reducible to these categories. The Other exceeds what I say of him or her as the disengagement of every form or representation I may have in place to comprehend him or her. This disengagement Levinas calls “denuding” and serves as the formal parallel to the infinity we spoke of earlier. In the “ethical relation” I encounter a distance between myself and the Other, rather than an alter-ego.¹⁰

If we are to speak of a distance here then it must be possible for the Other to signify apart from my representation of him or her. The Other must have a meaning by itself, signify *kath hauto* as Levinas likes to say (TI, 72/74). “The face of the Other at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me, the idea existing to my own measure and to the measure of the *ideatum* – the adequate idea. It does not manifest itself by these qualities, but *kath hauto* [sic]. It *expresses itself*” (TI, 43/50–51). This self-expression or self-presentation of the Other does not make an appearance as a phenomenon or object (TI, 237/215), but as the retreat from my meaning-structures. In later essays Levinas refers to this strange appearance as the “trace” of the Other.

A trace is not a trace of something. The trace of the Other refers to the hole or openness created by the distance of the Other. We can speak of openness here because my intentional grasp, the categories by which I would make sense of the Other, have been undone, have come unravelled before an exteriority which exceeds my interior dialogue. Autonomous thought, which rushes in to enfold exteriority with meaning, comes to the realization of its own incapacity, its insufficiency before the Other who divests itself of

my *Sinngungen*. The other person can simply say "no" to what I say. This no, which is not the no of force, has the effect of revealing the injustice of my freedom. Before the Other I encounter what cannot be made to fit neatly within a pre-established world of meaning and sense. I encounter absolute otherness, which is to say that I encounter distance, the ever-increasing gap between my thought and the Other.

Levinas argues that we experience this gap as an "enigma." An enigma is not a problem which at some later point admits of a solution. Nor is it simply the irrational or the absurd, for this would be to define it in terms of a measure of rationality. An enigma makes its (nonobjective) "presence" felt without there being the means by which to identify the cause or origin of this presence. The enigmatic represents a disturbance or interruption which is invisible to thought. "The alterity that disturbs order cannot be reduced to the difference visible to the gaze that compares and therefore synchronizes the same and the other. *Alterity occurs as a divergency and a past* which no memory could resurrect as present. And yet disturbance is possible only through an intervention. A stranger is then needed, one who has come, to be sure, but left *before* having come, absolute in his manifestation."¹¹

An enigma comes to pass as the overwhelming of consciousness, the taking of consciousness by surprise. The Other surprises and interrupts consciousness because it does not conform to what was expected (remembering that the Other absolves itself from my *Sinngungen*). To the extent that the Other does not fit within my pre-established order of meaning, he or she is not really present because the condition for presence is the adequation between idea and ideatum. Levinas describes this discrepancy as follows: "In the *meanwhile* (*entretemps*) the event expected turns into the past without being lived through, without being equaled, in any present."¹² The Other came and went without having fit into my world. My only sense that the Other might have come is the sense that my world has been disturbed by something of which I am not entirely sure. Autonomy has, in other words, been shaken, been put into question.

The "ethical relation" is, therefore, not a relation with an objectifiable presence. Hence its peculiar nature – a *relation sans relation*. It is, rather, an occasion for the interruption of autonomous thought. In the encounter with the Other consciousness is presented with its own insufficiency to overcome the non-adequation between idea and ideatum. It is not an insufficiency borne out of weakness, as though a strengthened consciousness would someday finally overcome this weakness, but of injustice before the Other who exceeds and puts into question my autonomy.

Our discussion of the "ethical relation" has now put us in a better position to understand the difference between maieutics and teaching, between autonomy and heteronomy. Maieutics is defined by the absence of radical exteriority. To be sure, others may be in the vicinity. But others do not

contribute in any fundamental way to the journey to truth and knowledge, I am a law unto myself, and therefore do not need others in more than a superficial sense (midwives only aid a process that goes on independently and quite naturally). What is more, the autonomous learner does not ever find his or her world seriously challenged. Spiritual midwives have the effect of making us comfortable with ourselves.¹³

The "experience" of heteronomy, however, reveals that an autonomous being is not entirely free in its appropriation of the world. In the "ethical relation" I encounter another person who exceeds my grasp, and in so doing puts into question the whole machinery and process by which I would comprehend him or her. For the first time I discover that I am not a law unto myself, that I am already handed over to the Other who reveals the injustice of my law. The Other does not simply question me, and therefore leaves me to myself. Rather, the Other puts me into question, and in so doing leaves me answerable for the insufficiency and injustice of autonomous thought. With the possibility of the acknowledgement of the injustice of my freedom I am introduced to the possibility of teaching.

When Levinas speaks of teaching he does not have in mind the transmission of a content or piece of information. Instead he wishes to point us to a more primordial conception of teaching, one which indicates the conditions necessary for there to be an opening of the self beyond its own frame of reference. In this respect teaching bears close affinities to the idea of revelation, understood as the irruption of the absolutely foreign rather than as the transmission of a positive content (as in the revealed doctrine of certain religions). As with the infinite, there is not first a content that is subsequently revealed. Revelation refers us to a modality called infinity – the revelation is constituted by the disproportion between idea and ideatum. "*Revelation constitutes a veritable inversion [of] objectifying cognition*" (TI, 63/67).

As we have seen with our discussion on the possibility for heteronomous experience, teaching will depend on an encounter with a reality that can disengage itself from the *Sinngebungen* of autonomous thought. Levinas writes: "The absolutely foreign alone can instruct us. And it is only man (*l'homme*) who could be absolutely foreign to me . . ." (TI, 71/73). The foreignness of the Other, furthermore, does not depend on my seeing another person as somehow strange or peculiar. It is rather that the Other is unique among things in its ability to reveal the distance between my idea of the Other and the Other *kath'auto*. In the face of the Other we meet not a transcendent object (as though it made sense to speak of such a thing) but transascendence. "Teaching signifies the whole infinity of exteriority. And the whole infinity of exteriority is not first produced to then teach: teaching is its very production. The first teaching teaches this very height, tantamount to its exteriority, the ethical" (TI, 185–86/171). In other words, teaching teaches distance, the insufficiency and the injustice of autonomous life.

This description of teaching clearly takes us beyond the conception of learning suggested by maieutics. The opening of the self beyond itself is not possible solely in terms of the self, in terms of one's forgotten, though recoverable, resources. If teaching is to be possible at all there must be an encounter with the Other. In this encounter a profound change in the self becomes possible. This change we have called "metanoia," the redirection of the self from interiority to exteriority. It is not a term that Levinas himself uses, but it is nonetheless suggestive. Metanoia means repentance, the acknowledgement of wrongdoing, in the face of a power beyond myself. This sense is in keeping with Levinas's repeated statements to the effect of the injustice of autonomy. Its religious connotation is also in alignment with Levinas's assertion that religion is "the bond that is established between the same and the other without constituting a totality" (*TI*, 30/40). The redirection of the self to exteriority is a "conversion" because it is a movement that is not deducible from the identity of the self, is not commensurate with the self (*TI*, 56/61). Teaching depends on the possibility that my whole being can be put into question.

The account of teaching offered here would seem to have the odd conclusion that learning is impossible. If teaching entails the putting into question of my being, does this not entail the cessation of my power or freedom? Does not heteronomy spell the death of autonomy? Once again, if this is how we understand Levinas then we have surely missed his meaning. Teaching does not amount to the overthrow of autonomy. It leads rather to its redirection, its movement outward. If learning requires the reception of something truly new, and not simply the recovery of a forgotten moment from my past, then it must be possible that the self who learns is not annihilated but opened up. The interruption of my powers does not necessarily entail their cessation. Far from simply closing off my freedom, the Other makes possible the investiture of my freedom. "The presence of the Other, a privileged heteronomy, does not clash with freedom but invests it" (*TI*, 88/88). Levinas is calling our attention to the *ennui* that inevitably follows from a self-enclosed life. The encounter with the Other introduces us to the astonishing adventure called inspired living. The Other invests my freedom, inspires my being, by putting me on a new path of responsibility to a law beyond myself. "To recognize the Other is to give" (*TI*, 73/75).

4.

With this account of teaching we can now turn to more general considerations of how a conception of teaching alters the nature of the philosophical task. When philosophy is inspired by maieutics, then the philosophical journey is in essence a solitary one. As a law unto myself I am beholden to no one. Here the possibility of an encounter with genuine exteriority has been precluded from the start since all the resources I need for the coming to

knowledge and truth are already within my possession. Socrates is clear that philosophy promises no discoveries. At best it can help us recover what is temporarily forgotten and buried.

When philosophy is inspired by the teaching of the Other, the situation of the philosophical traveler looks very different. Now I am no longer alone. I am, as it were, handed over to the Other, responsible to him or her as the one who redirects my interior life to an exteriority. Here we can talk about discovery because nothing within myself could have prepared me for the things I have yet to learn. As my teacher the Other does not fill me with a new content. Rather, he or she opens me up so that I can venture onto paths beyond my established world-view. For the one who is taught life becomes an adventure, a happening that comes to us without design. No doubt this puts the learner in an uncomfortable position because the security and the confidence that mark autonomous life must now be left behind.

Levinas is fully aware that this conception of teaching is difficult. Beyond the conceptual difficulty of heteronomous "experience" there is the further psychological fact of egoism. The avoidance of apologies in our day to day conversation mark a resistance to the acknowledgement of our injustice before others. It is perhaps for this very reason that Levinas locates apology, the "inclination before the transcendent," at the center of conversation (TI, 29/40). An apo-logy, the word spoken to the Other, acknowledges that I am not a law unto myself. I need the Other, if for no other reason than to keep the claims I make about the world from perpetuating injustice after injustice. Moreover, a conception of teaching as matanoia goes to the heart of Levinas's reconception of language as the difference between the saying (*dire*) and the said (*dit*), a distinction prefigured in *Totality and Infinity* as a saying/unsaying/resaying (*dire/dédire/redire*) (TI, 16/30).

There is yet another reason why a conception of teaching must play a central role within the philosophical enterprise. It has to do with the nature of the knowledge and truth claims we hope to make. If philosophy has maieutics as its model, then it is apparent that there is little that can answer the objection that claims so derived are either naive or dogmatic. To the extent that I am a law unto myself I am answerable to no one. Nothing exterior to me can challenge the veracity of the interior monologue I have with myself, for in order for it to appear within that monologue its radical alterity must first be muted or dissimulated. And because my claims go fundamentally without challenge they are naive or dogmatic.

Levinas's description of the "ethical relation" and of teaching serves as a corrective to this manner of philosophizing. Teaching, as the putting into question of autonomy, opens up the possibility for a critical knowing of reality, a knowing that is in-formed and inspired by exteriority. This possibility depends on the metanoia of autonomous thought. "The freedom that can be ashamed of itself founds truth . . ." (TI, 82/83) says Levinas. What philosophers of autonomy fail to realize is that without the Other,

freedom is arbitrary. My freedom is not the last word. "The transitivity of teaching, and not the interiority of reminiscence, manifests being; the locus of truth is society. The *moral* relation with the Master who judges me sub-tends the freedom of my adherence to the true" (*TI*, 104/101).

Does this conception spell the end of philosophy? Given what we have said about the relation between autonomy and heteronomy, clearly not. Philosophy will continue the activity of mediation. Heteronomy does not annihilate autonomy. But with the teaching of the Other philosophy is given new life. Philosophical practice can proceed with a renewed sense of "critical speculation and interrogation." As Levinas put it in one of his interviews: "Reason is never so versatile as when it puts itself in question. In the contemporary end of philosophy, philosophy has found a new lease on life."¹⁴

Notes

- 1 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et Infini: Essais sur l'extériorité* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1961), p. 84, translated by Alphonso Lingis as *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), p. 85. All references to this work, French pagination first (we will refer to the pocketbook edition published by Brodard & Taupin), will be included in the text following the abbreviation *TI*.
- 2 First Published in *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 62, pp. 241–253, and subsequently reprinted in *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*, 2nd edition (Paris: Vrin, 1967), pp. 165–178 and Adriaan Peperzak's *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1993), pp. 73–87. Peperzak has included Alphonso Lingis's translation (slightly revised) of this essay as "Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite" (with commentary) pp. 88–119. All references to this essay (abbreviated *PII*) will be drawn from *To the Other*, and will be included directly in the text.
- 3 In *Totality and Infinity* Levinas is explicit in the linking of maieutics/anamnesis with the comforts of home. He writes: "Recollection and representation are produced concretely as *habitation in a dwelling* or a Home" (*TI*, 161/150).
- 4 It is precisely the linkage of maieutics with anamnesis that prevents this description of autonomy from reverting to modern formulations of autonomy as self-legislation. In the Socratic view the turn inward does not stop with the self. The self is, as it were, opened to the *eidé*, to the essences of things in their full reality. In modern philosophy this turn beyond the self gets cut off. For a recent description of this development see Louis Dupré's *Passage to Modernity: An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993). What Levinas will question is why the self, rather than another person, is given pride of place in the journey, even if the journey, as in Plato, does not find its basis solely with the self.
- 5 T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (London: Faber & Faber, 1944), p. 48.
- 6 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd edition (New York: Crossroad, 1991), pp. 362–379.
- 7 The question of silence sits, among others, at the heart of Jacques Derrida's influential essay on Levinas, "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas" (trans. Alan Bass in *Writing and Difference*, Chicago:

- University of Chicago Press, 1978). Derrida writes: "As soon as one attempts to think Infinity as a positive plenitude (one pole of Levinas's nonnegative transcendence), the other becomes unthinkable, impossible, unutterable" (p. 114). We will have occasion to question Derrida's use of the term "positive plenitude" since it represents an objectivist reading Levinas works against. As we will see when we turn to Levinas's account of heteronomy, the infinite or transcendent does not signify as an object of thought but as a manner or mode of thinking.
- 8 John D. Caputo, *Against Ethics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 80. Caputo admits that Levinas wants to avoid the dialectical opposition of self and other that would lead to their *Aufhebung* in some grand narrative, but he fails to account for Levinas's assertion that the "ethical relation" is a "*relation sans relation*." In *Demythologizing Heidegger* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993) Caputo again mistakenly charges Levinas with attempting the impossible, i.e., to "avoid being-otherwise" (p. 199). For Levinas the "otherwise than being" is not outside of being altogether, as though it could exist in some pristine, isolated location. The transcendence of the Other signifies not as a theme or content but as the interruption of self-referential consciousness. How this is possible we have now to see.
 - 9 René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* in vol. II of *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (trans. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff & D. Murdoch, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 31.
 - 10 In his 1965 essay "Enigme et phénomène," which first appeared in *Esprit* (reprinted in *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger* and translated by Alphonso Lingis as "Phenomenon and Enigma" in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), Levinas wrote: "The relationship with the infinite is not a cognition but an approach, a neighboring with what signifies itself without revealing itself, what departs but not to dissimulate itself" (p. 216/73).
 - 11 Ibid., pp. 210–211/68.
 - 12 Ibid., p. 211/68.
 - 13 Another way of describing this comfort is to notice that in a conversation I can always leave when the questions get too troubling. This leavetaking can assume many forms, as when I physically depart from an interlocutor or when I feign ignorance with respect to a question – the question is said to fall upon deaf ears. Here the person questioned cannot "hear" what I have to say because he or she cannot absorb or integrate my words. The effect of this deafness is to leave the questioned person's world intact or untroubled.
 - 14 Emmanuel Levinas and Richard Kearney, "Dialogue With Emmanuel Levinas," in *Face to Face With Levinas*, ed. Richard A. Cohen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), p. 33.

FROM ETHICS TO LANGUAGE

The imperative of the Other*

*Edith Wyschogrod*Source: *Semiotica* 97 (1/2) (1993): 163–76.

What can be learned about language when the focus of inquiry is shifted from the specific content of utterances to the one who speaks and addresses this speech to others, the move from what is said to its saying? This is the deflection or de-formation of language that is examined in the work of Emmanuel Levinas, a French phenomenological thinker whose position is distinguished by its claim that ethics is first philosophy, thus breaking the traditional bond between philosophy and being. For Levinas (in many of his writings) as for Peirce, language presupposes a speaker, a sign, and an addressee. But the three do not coexist at the same level linked as elements in a project of communication interpreted as the circulation of signs within a system of signs. Instead, for Levinas, the connection of word to speaker is deeper, more fundamental, than that of word to object or sign to sign such that the speaker binds the hearer to his¹ word prior to its actual utterance. Thus there is language before there is propositional content, before the ‘message’ conveyed in word or gesture is made manifest.

The meaning of sentences depends not upon their semantic, grammatical, and lexical properties, even if what is said exhibits such properties, but upon the anterior relation of speaker to word. This altered emphasis is not a strategy for semantic expansion, a focus on the speaker in order to enlarge the social framework or context of utterance, although this may be an incidental outcome of the move; rather, it is intended to show that the speaker solicits his addressees by his sheer exposure to the Other.² A speech act, no matter what else it may be, is an appeal to the addressee to *hearken* — an archaism that catches both listening in the sense of appropriating what is audible and taking to heart.

This relation of speaker to what is spoken, a relation anterior to the communicative act, is an ethical bond, one in which speech becomes a provocation

to its addressee to respond. If this is so, in what sense is language ethical? If its ethical character depends (somehow) upon what is prior to verbal utterance, upon what is exterior to that utterance, then speech is a fall and language cannot be ethical. In that case, the loss of this primal ethical ligature between speaker and speech appears to entail a depreciation or devaluation of linguistic meaning, yet it is language that binds human beings together. And are not assertions about the relation of speaker to speech self-contradictory once they purport to render in language what is itself neither language nor phenomenon, and therefore beyond description? Does not the sheer ineffability of this relation preclude further investigation? Is there some way in which language could retain traces of the ethical anteriority of the speaker? What is more, does not language's primordial relation to ethics break the bond between language and being as understood by Heidegger? In sum, what must be true about language, if the speaker is bound to his speech in a way that both precedes and bypasses its content?

These are largely the questions that directly or indirectly exercise the commentators on Levinas's philosophy of language in the excellent collection of essays under review here. Although Levinas has written extensively, especially in *Totality and Infinity* (1969), about concrete phenomena that exhibit ethical import, for this reviewer as well as for most of the contributors to the present volume, his later work, *Otherwise than Being and Beyond Essence* (1981), contains his most complex and significant philosophical thought. In this dense and sometimes well-nigh impenetrable work, he explores the relation of language to ethics, thus developing, deepening, and enriching themes in such earlier writings as *Time and the Other* (1987) and *Existence and Existents* (1978).

In what follows I shall consider Levinas's philosophy of language with an eye to the criticisms and comments raised in *Re-Reading Levinas* (1991), virtually all of them offering new departures both in substance and style from earlier standard interpretations of Levinas as an heir of Husserl's phenomenological philosophy. First, I shall discuss the terms in which Levinas explicates the relation of language to ethics: the Saying, the pre-lingual ethical bond between speaker and utterance, and the said, the utterance itself. I shall do so by reading (or re-reading) Levinas as a counterreader of Heidegger's claim that poetry is the primordial manifestation of language. In this way, key issues in Levinas's philosophy of language will be explicated and the ground prepared for the new ways of interpreting him that richly illuminate his work in the volume under review. I shall do so in the awareness of the deconstructive reading given to Levinas in Jacques Derrida's essay 'At this very moment, in this work here I am' (Bernasconi and Critchley, pp. 11–66) in that it provides one of the foci for the commentaries of Ruben Berezdivin, Fabio Ciaramelli, Simon Critchley, and Paul Davies and indirectly for those of Noreen O'Connor and John Llewelyn.

Next I shall turn to the strategies Levinas uses to both highlight and to exploit the paradoxes that arise in connection with the unsayability of the ethical, specifically his recourse to the relation of skepticism to its refutation, a Levinasian theme explicated in the essays of Robert Bernasconi, Jean Greisch, and Adriaan Peperzak. Skepticism, the philosophical position that attacks reason's capacity to ground truth, is nevertheless reason's child, so to speak, that turns reason against itself. Despite the refutation of various skeptical arguments from Carneades to Hume, skepticism rearises, Levinas thinks, and contests reason's claim to arrive at truth. Levinas's account of skepticism's challenge, subsequent refutation, and phoenix-like reemergence functions principally as a metaphor for the relation of the Saying to the said, of a pre-originary ethical language to speech.

Finally I shall consider some issues raised by feminism in connection with Levinas's philosophy of language, especially the argument that the subject of ethics or Saying must be a woman, matters treated in essays by Luce Irigaray, Catherine Chaliel, and Tina Chanter.

From saying to said: The exiled word

It may be useful as a prolegomenon to reading the present collection to sketch in a rudimentary way how Heidegger's view of language fares under a Levinasian reading. In so doing, Levinas's own discourse can be seen as an already deconstructive dismantling of Heidegger's interpretation of language as *poiesis*. Despite his many allusions to Heidegger, Levinas does not himself undertake this task directly, nor do the commentators in the present volume focus on the relation to Heidegger. But his analysis of speech and what is exterior to it, when read as a gloss on Heidegger's account of language, seems to me an almost indispensable starting point for illuminating the complexities of Levinas's language philosophy and thus also an entering wedge for the re-readings of the present collection.

In his essay 'Hölderlin and the essence of poetry' (1949: 291–316), Heidegger makes a number of claims that, on the face of it, Levinas should find congenial. First, he maintains, the essence of language is not to be confused with the conveying of information. '[Language] is not a mere tool but that which affords the very possibility of standing in the openness of the existent' (1949: 301). Second, Heidegger, following Hölderlin, proclaims that 'mankind is a conversation' (1949: 301), an affirmation that is taken to mean that we become what we are in 'the act of speaking with others about something' (1949: 301). Yet speaking is not only about something but also a social act, a fostering of 'the process of coming together' (1949: 301) such that in it we both speak and hear. In a conversation the word abides and focuses upon one and the same thing. To be the same, the conversation's theme, logos, or word must persist through time. Thus conversation is temporalizing, the opening up of change and permanence and, as such, also of the possibility

of our existence as historical beings. 'We have been a single conversation since the time when it "is time"' (1949: 302), Heidegger declares.

Levinas shares the idea that language is not primarily a medium through which information circulates and, like Heidegger, affirms the social character of language as a speaking (*sprechen*) and a hearing (*hören*) of another. But if Levinas agrees that language is not a tool of communication and presupposes a coming together of human beings, as Heidegger maintains, what features of Heidegger's account are deconstructed by Levinas? To see where and how Heidegger's reading is resisted, that reading must be followed several steps further.

The primordial actualization of the conversation that is language, Heidegger says, occurs as an opening out of being so that that which exists can be brought to appearance (1949: 304). This occurs through acts of poetic nomination in which the poet names the gods and transforms the world into word, 'nam[ing] all things into that which they are', he declares (1949: 304). It is the poet 'who lays hold of something permanent in ravenous time and fixes it in the word' (Heidegger 1949: 303). Through the act of nomination the poet does not name what is already known, but speaks the essential word, through which the existent is nominated as what it is. In sum, according to Heidegger, 'poetry is the establishing of being by means of the word' (1949: 304).

What is more, for Heidegger, the poet's naming of the gods and bringing the world into word is a 'free act of giving [that grounds] human existence on its foundation' (1949: 305). This aspect of his account — the idea that the relation between speaker (poet) and word is essential rather than incidental and that the speaker is the giver of a gift — would also appear to be compatible with Levinas's argument that there is a primordial bond, rather than a chance linkage, between speaker and what is spoken. For Levinas too the speaker is also the bestower of a gift, the gift of self. It is not my aim to explore Heidegger's essay on Hölderlin against the larger setting of his other works, nor its coherence within that context. Instead I shall try to bring out Levinas's counterreading: the denial that language is in its essence poetry and the affirmation that meaning arises out of the ethical relation with another.

I have already suggested that Levinas's philosophy of language is articulated in terms of a distinction between Saying and said, that Saying bypasses language in the ordinary sense and reflects the way in which one addresses the Other, becomes responsible for the Other, and provokes the Other's response, whereas the said is language as a relation of word and being. Although there are parallels with Heidegger's account, most strikingly in Levinas's explication of the said, the interplay of Saying and said cannot leave the said unaffected, as if the said could be described in purely Heideggerian terms. Moreover, the intricacies of style leave unresolved ambiguities such as when Levinas's inquiry is transcendental and when

straightforwardly empirical. But for present purposes, the isolation of several salient features of his philosophy of language should suffice.

In the sections on language in Chapter II of *Otherwise than Being* (Levinas 1981: 31–43), it is claimed that nouns are a conspicuous feature of language and designate entities, so that language seems to be primordially nominative, a doubling of entities and relations by way of the words that name objects. But language in the usual sense of the spoken word is not merely a presentation of beings through acts of denomination. Instead language has a dual function, nominative and verbal, commensurate with what Levinas calls the amphibology or doubleness of being. To be sure, the noun that doubles what it names is necessary for the thing's identity. Language as nominative '[assembles] the passing flow of sensation [so that the noun] denominates or names entities' (Levinas 1981: 35). But language is also 'an excrescence of the verb [and as such] already bears sensible life — temporalization and being's essence' (Levinas 1981: 35). The relation to time and sensibility of the verb is rooted in being or, in Levinas's more radical formulation, 'being is the verb itself' (1981: 35).

Being does not simply name the verb: instead 'the verb is the very resonance of being understood as being' (Levinas 1981: 40). Because verbs manifest existence so that existence throbs, as it were, through them, being and the verb are inseparable. Verbs are also intrinsically related to essences, so much so that their relation is virtually commutable. 'The essence properly so-called is the verb, the logos, that resounds in the prose of predicative propositions' (Levinas 1981: 39–40). Language as verbal does not merely make being comprehensible but 'make its essence vibrate', Levinas says (1981: 35). The relation of verb to essence alters the traditional grasp of essences as reflecting the permanent substratum of things. Instead time unfolds in the essence in a temporally distended act of manifesting that is revealed in predicative statements.

Despite the temporal spread of the verb, there is always the possibility of recovering the time that passes by means of memory, or of anticipating the future through imagination so that both past and future are carried into the present. In writing too, Levinas claims, signs are assembled into patterns of meaning that bring these meanings into presence (1981: 51). (Levinas ignores Derrida's attribution to writing of just those characteristics of irrecoverability and temporal lapse that he himself ascribes to Saying.) The amphibology of being, being's doubleness that opens into the noun and verb forms of ontological language, does not, however, allow for an irrecoverable lapse of time, a lag that cannot be brought into presence. Thus the temporal mode of the said is synchronic: the exhibiting of what passes as simultaneity and presence. The said is the sphere of ontology's linguistic illumination such that time is arrested and the resounding of being's temporal unfolding gathered up into present time. In sum, Levinas declares of the said:

Language qua said can then be conceived as a system of nouns identifying entities, and then as a system of signs doubling up the beings, designating substances, events and relations by substantives or other parts of speech derived from substantives, designating entities — in sum, *designating*. But also . . . language can be conceived as the verb in predicative proposition in which the substances break down into modes of being, modes of temporalization. Here language does not double up the being of entities but exposes the silent resonance of the essence.

(1981: 40)

It is not the said, the language of ontology that is the ultimate source of signification, but the Saying that signifies prior to language and being, to essence and nomination. I have already alluded to the methodological difficulty in bringing into view a Saying that is beyond language. The method of negation as deployed in negative theology cannot help because such negation is parasitic upon a prior ontological ground: what is described in negative theology already exists and exists pre-eminently. Levinas resorts instead to phenomenological reduction or bracketing (1981: 53), the technique developed by Husserl to filter out our ordinary belief in factual existence (what Husserl called the natural attitude) in order to elicit the pure phenomena that our usual way of looking obscures. This belief is held in abeyance, neither affirmed nor denied, in order to see what it has covered over. For Levinas what is concealed by the ontological language of the said is the pre-verbal ethical relation between speaker and addressee. With bracketing, the said does not disappear, but it no longer clouds the Saying.

Just as Husserl's method of reduction has sometimes been viewed less as an epistemological strategy than as an askesis, a spiritual discipline, so too Levinas's move from the said to Saying is a call, as it were, to bring out the ethical dimension of language. One begins with the said: 'One can go back to the saying . . . only from the said', he declares (1981: 44). But far from being the passing from the ontology of the said to another ontology, that of the Saying, the latter is altogether different. 'It is the reduction to signification, to the one-for-the-other involved in responsibility' (Levinas 1981: 45).

Still the question persists: 'How does one arrive at Saying?' Levinas's first response is 'through proximity', by which he means something 'quite distinct from every other relationship . . . [one] conceived as a responsibility for the other; it might be called humanity, or subjectivity, or self' (1981: 46). These expressions cannot be taken in their ordinary significations. Far from the term humanity signifying a generalized sympathy, or subjectivity and self signifying ego or will, Levinas intends these terms to point to a divestiture of the assertive properties generally attributed to them. Because the self rids itself of itself (denucleates, in his terms), cannot recover itself in memory or anticipation, the time scheme of Saying differs from that of the said.

In Saying there is a lapse of time, a past that never could have been present and is, as such, irrecoverable. Aging is one of Levinas's tropes for the diachrony of time, the refusal of the past to undo itself in order to become a new now.

If Saying is responsibility for the other, to or for whom is someone responsible? And who is the someone that is the subject of this responsibility? What does it mean to be responsible? Levinas, in characteristically arcane fashion, responds with a question: 'Who? . . . [Who] will arise out of the original, or pre-original, saying of responsibility. . . . Who is speaking?' (1981: 189). He goes on to show that it is not the Cartesian, Kantian, Hegelian, or Husserlian subject that is the self of Saying, but the self in its abandonment of will and acts of cognition. Such a subject, the subject of proximity, approaches the Other by 'deposing or de-situating' the self, Levinas claims (1981: 48). 'To say', he adds, 'is to approach the neighbor "dealing him signifyingness"' (1981: 48), a signifyingness that is extreme: the willingness to substitute oneself or become hostage for the Other. Saying 'communicates' with the Other not through verbal message or narrative but through exposure, 'the risky uncovering of oneself' (Levinas 1981: 48). Passive, inseparable from suffering on behalf of another, Saying is a folly within reason.

If Saying occurs at a level other than that of language, how does the responsibility intrinsic to it find its way back into language so that something of the ordinary meaning of responsibility can be preserved? Why must proximity fall into being in the first place? Proximity as a relation between self and Other is unproblematic and self-evident. In order for there to be a need for language in the usual sense, proximity must itself somehow become open to question. For Levinas this occurs with the entrance of the third party into the unilateral relation with the Other so that one is forced to ask how the third, the one who is other than the other, is to be configured. Levinas responds by conceding that justice depends on 'comparison, coexistence, contemporaneousness, assembling order, thematization . . . the intelligibility of a system . . . copresence on an equal footing' (1981: 157), a weighing and measuring that is the task of philosophy and jurisprudence. Forced to objectify what is owed, to take account of *all* the others, the order of justice is produced. Proximity is not displaced but becomes the prior condition for the justice that is actualized in the realm of the said. If proximity is evaded, an entering wedge for injustice is created that, at its nadir, degenerates into a war of all against all. The task of philosophy, Levinas maintains, is to clarify conceptually what cannot, in the end, be clarified, 'the synchron[ization] in the said of the diachrony of the difference between the one and the other, and [to] remain the servant of the saying . . . the one for the other' (1981: 162).

It is not art, as for Heidegger, but justice that evinces the traces of proximity, of one-for-the-Other. Art for Levinas is a precipitate of the resounding of essence and exhibits essences in their purity. Not the residue,

but the condensation, as it were, of essence, art draws the beholder or listener to itself. For Levinas, 'the said is reduced to the beautiful which supports Western ontology. Through art, essence and temporality begin to resound with poetry and song' (1981: 40). Art is thus an extreme form of the verballity of the verb, 'essence in dissemination' (Levinas 1981: 41).

It is now possible to re-read Levinas's account of language as, in part, a deconstructive gloss on Heidegger's description of language as *poiesis*. I suggested earlier that Levinas agrees with Heidegger that language is not primordially a tool for conveying information. Yet for Heidegger 'it affords the possibility of standing in the openness of the existent' (1949: 301), so that it makes manifest the world of beings in their difference from being. It is the shining appearing of the beings that is crucial for him, whereas for Levinas, language is required in order to become the locus of justice. In order for there to be justice there must be a fall into the said, and if there is justice, the said is no longer fallen but partially redeemed. If mankind is a conversation, as Heidegger insisted, for Levinas it is the proximity of the face-to-face relation with one's neighbor that is of fundamental importance; the conversation's upshot is secondary. And if Levinas thinks of language as a gift, it is not as a gift of the poetic word but of a self that is at the disposal of the Other.

Skepticism and philosophy

In discussing skepticism's role in Levinas's philosophy of language, it may be useful to elaborate further upon the meaning of the gift because the two are closely conjoined. Is Levinas's own work to be interpreted as a gift to the reader? Is Levinas's re-reading of Heidegger a gift? To whom? Heidegger? The reader? And if Levinas's writing is a provocation demanding response rather than a text requiring interpretation, what joy is there in receiving such a gift?

It is worth noting that one of Derrida's most trenchant critiques of Western ontology, 'Plato's pharmacy' in *Disseminations* (1981: 61–172), expands upon the double meaning of the Greek term *pharmakon*, a word signifying both remedy and poison, the latter translatable by the German *Gift*, a homonym for the English gift but of far different signification. This double meaning — remedy and poison — suggested by Derrida's wordplay winds not only through Levinas's reading of Heidegger, but also through Levinas's and Derrida's far more amicable textual exchanges. What is more, skepticism too, the subject of the present section, is treated as both salutary and poisonous in the history of reason.

Derrida's early essay 'Violence and metaphysics' is a criticism of Levinas's work as self-defeating because the ethical relation with the Other is drawn into discourse, a discourse that can only betray an ethics that is exterior to it. Yet Derrida also highlights the inescapability of the return to philosophical

language. Derrida's double reading provokes Levinas to respond in *Otherwise than Being and Beyond Essence* (1981) not directly, but through an analysis of skepticism, the philosophical position that, from within philosophy, reflects the fall of reason. Derrida's appraisal of Levinas in 'Violence and metaphysics' thus becomes the provocation for an indirect reading of Derrida on Levinas's part. Just as skepticism rearises after it has been refuted, so too, it may be assumed, the Saying will not be swallowed up by the said nor the provocation of ethics by philosophy, as Derrida seems to allege. Derrida's critique is for Levinas not a hermeneutical issue but an ethical provocation.

How does Derrida respond to this alliance (or *mésalliance*) of himself with skepticism? Does he realize that Levinas's account of skepticism is aimed at him? Does his text betray this knowledge? What gift can he now bestow? Derrida notices that Levinas has written that 'Work requires a radical generosity of the one [who] . . . in the work goes unto the other. It then requires an ingratitude of the other' (in Bernasconi and Critchley, p. 155). If Derrida is to be generous (in Levinas's terms), he must be ungenerous and refuse to gloss Levinas's 'original', an act that would constitute returning the gift in an act of barter.

The collection of articles under consideration opens with a brief appreciation by Levinas for Derrida in which Levinas interprets the doubleness of deconstruction as bound to philosophical reflection while, at the same time, allowing the reader to catch a glimpse of 'the interstices of Being where this very reflection unsays itself' (p. 6). Derrida's essay that follows, 'At this very moment in this work here I am' (pp. 11–50), originally written for a volume paying tribute to Levinas and thus intended as a gift to Levinas, can be characterized as something between homily and hagiography, at once reproachful and elegiac. It is in the chiasm, or crossover point, where the two meet and separate that the discourse about skepticism takes place and becomes the focus for further commentary by other contributors.

Adriaan Peperzak's contribution, 'Presentation' (pp. 51–67), proposes that because of skepticism's dissatisfaction with reason, it tries to locate itself outside philosophy. When skepticism contends that no statements are true, the refutation of that claim consists in showing that, whether the statement is true or false, skepticism's claim is refuted. But could the skeptic not argue that the thesis of skepticism is true once it is seen to belong to a metalanguage that describes the truth status of statements? Peperzak contends there can be no metaphilosophical level from which a thesis about all philosophical theses could be propounded. If skepticism is to be saved, skeptical discourse must occur at another level, not that of metalanguage but rather as temporal differentiation, a distinction between the time of the skeptical thesis and its refutation. The positing of different orders of time is, in fact, central to Levinas's argument. But Peperzak maintains that both skepticism and its refutation belong to the same level, that of the said. 'The structure of both saids is not different; both are parts of the same logic' (p. 56). If they

fail to 'resound at the same time' (p. 56), there is no irreducible temporal lapse between them. It is simply impossible to narrate all the parts of the thesis at once. What is crucial for Levinas, however, is that by contesting the possibility of truth in philosophy, skepticism points beyond the said, beyond what can be framed in concepts.

The metalanguage argument in the context of the Saying and the said is also rejected by Derrida (unless, of course, one gives a deconstructive double reading to his account). Levinas's phrase 'Here I am', he contends in his contribution to this volume, is an invocation: in the language of speech act theory it is used, not mentioned (p. 22). For Levinas, 'Here I am' cannot become a descriptive statement, but remains performative, an offer to put himself at the Other's disposal. Similarly, Jan de Greef, in an early response to Levinas's use of skepticism, 'Skepticism and reason' (de Greef 1986: 159–180), argues that Levinas's "work" is not metalinguistic relative to the language he presents . . . it is not commentary nor exposition but . . . self-exposure' (de Greef 1986: 170).

Fabio Ciaramelli, in 'Levinas's ethical discourse between individuation and universality' in the volume under review, sees in the recurrence of skepticism and its refutation a parallel to the return of the speaking subject in the movement of the Saying. He goes on to argue that skepticism's perennial resurgence suggests another problem: that of particularity and universality in Levinas's ethics. The I of proximity challenges the universality generally attributed to prescriptive statements in the tradition of Western moral philosophy from Plato to Kant. Must universality be subordinated to the subject of ethics, or is there a way to preserve it without losing the particularity of the subject? Can universality manifest itself at the primordial plane of ethics? For this to be the case, there must be at the level of Saying an appeal not only of an Other but of all the others. Thus he writes, 'prior to the passage to justice and within the ordinary ethical situation itself . . . [one might find] a more positive evaluation of reciprocity. . . . In this way the universalization of the ethical demands . . . would be derived directly from the appeal of the other' (pp. 100–101).

Attractive as the idea of a primordial universality may be, if Levinas were to agree with Ciaramelli, the singularity of the subject would be submerged, enmeshed in actual language from the start. Language would not, as Levinas contends, already be skepticism, interrupted by an alterity that is unincorporable in it, but would have to express the universal as Hegel had argued.

Robert Bernasconi, a contributor as well as the volume's editor, continues the discussion of the problem of levels in Levinas's account of skepticism. Stressing skepticism's diachrony, he is more sympathetic than Peperzak to the idea of the incommensurability of planes between the assertions of skepticism and their refutation, and thus also more accepting of skepticism's usefulness as a trope for the difference between the Saying

and the said. Bernasconi notices that Levinas's argument that skepticism eludes the synchronic time scheme of philosophy presupposes the classical notion that the principle of non-contradiction stipulates that contradictories cannot be said to hold *at the same time* (p. 150). Thus, with this proviso, skepticism and its refutation could be maintained as long as they were not held simultaneously. Bernasconi also (indirectly) catches the descriptive and performative aspects of skepticism and its refutation when, citing Levinas, he writes: 'Skepticism . . . affirm[s] "the impossibility of statement while venturing to realize this impossibility by the very statement of this impossibility"' (p. 150). Thus skepticism is affirmed as a descriptive statement about propositions, but also as a quasi-realized act of existential import. In fact, Bernasconi observes that ancient skepticism was not only an epistemological doctrine but a way of life.

The Other as woman

The meaning of alterity or otherness is at the heart of Levinas's philosophy in that the manifestation of the Other opens the field of ethical relations. In his earlier work, especially in *Totality and Infinity* (1969), the Other is configured as the human face that, in its very appearing, proscribes violence and mandates that one be willing to substitute oneself for the Other. The 'space' between self and other is asymmetrical, the Other appearing as from a height and as commanding the response of the self. In Levinas's later philosophy of language, the subject of the present essay, the ethical sphere begins with the one who speaks, with the diachrony of Saying, the irrecoverable time scheme of ethics. Of course alterity can manifest itself in other ways: anything that is presented to consciousness is other than the self. But for Levinas otherness of this sort is sublated, because objects are taken up by consciousness in perceptual or cognitive acts or, in Levinas's language, reduced to the Same.

It is in this context that feminist analyses of Levinas should be understood. Earlier I justified the use of masculine pronouns in explicating Levinas precisely because those are the terms in which his work is articulated. Feminist criticisms (Derrida's as well as that of Irigaray, Chaliel, and Chanter) focus on the question: who is Levinas's Other? Can there be alterity in the absence of sexual difference?

Derrida's response in this volume is an effort to show that the absence of sexual differentiation itself presupposes conferring a privilege upon the masculine. Thus he writes:

E.L.'s work seems to me always to have rendered secondary, derivative and subordinate, alterity as sexual difference . . . to the alterity of a sexually non-marked wholly other. It is not woman or the feminine that he has rendered secondary, derivative or subordinate, but sexual

difference. Once sexual difference is subordinated, it is always the case that the wholly other, *who is not yet marked* is *already* found to be marked by masculinity.

(p. 40)

Derrida finds that Levinas misses on issues of sex and gender by default. By rendering sexual difference secondary, Levinas maintains traditional (hence masculine) categories.

Luce Irigaray, in her contribution, 'Questions to Emmanuel Levinas' (pp. 109–118), contends that Levinas's ethics is not masculine through a simple forfeiture of sexual differentiation in his construal of otherness. Instead she argues that Levinasian alterity is grounded in the father–son and man–God relations, especially because Levinas sees in the relation of father to son a son who is both self and Other opening the possibility for engendering intergenerational justice. No such relation subsists between mother and daughter. This, she argues, places Levinas within rather than outside the philosophical framework that ethics is intended to criticize.

Tina Chanter, in her essay 'Antigone's dilemma' (pp. 130–148), addresses what she sees as Irigaray's polarization of man and woman. Does an attempt such as Irigaray's to pit the essence of woman as Other against a masculine account of alterity not fall victim to the same logic it purports to criticize? Does it not reinstate what Levinas calls the order of the same, the encasing of alterity in philosophical definition? Chanter does not pretend to have a solution for this problem. For her it opens the basic philosophical question of essences and their relation to time and language. On the traditional reading of essences, any polarization of essences falls within the framework of philosophical thinking that the Other calls into question. If there is an essence of woman she ceases to be Other. Is it possible to transcend the framework of ontology altogether? With Derrida, Chanter concedes that the effort to divest an inquiry about essences of its history would be naive and unreflective.

Catherine Chaliel, in her article 'Ethics and the feminine', offers a feminist counterreading of other feminist interpretations of Levinas. She holds that the philosophy of being that Levinas contests is an expression of virility, one from which Levinas specifically dissociates himself, and that his break with ontology should be read as a feminist challenge to ontological thinking. Thus (citing Levinas) she writes: 'the ontological function of the feminine' is 'to overcome an alienation which fundamentally arises from the very virility of the universal and conquering logos' (p. 119). The contesting of ontology comes from a willingness to substitute oneself for the other, an excessiveness that transcends what is generally believed to be morally required, an excessiveness that Levinas claims to find in maternity both as trope and example. Chaliel writes that for Levinas, the maternal body 'has to answer for the Other' and 'suffers for the Other' (p. 119). Chaliel rejects

the reduction of woman to the function of maternity and prefers Biblical examples of self-giving on the part of women. (It could be objected that similar acts might be adduced for men.) What is compelling in her analysis is the identification of ontology with virility and the break with it as the incursion of a specifically feminine alterity.

I have not commented on the excellent articles of Davies, Critchley, and Berezdivin, to name a few, because they do not focus upon themes likely to engage linguists and language philosophers. But for those who care to extend their acquaintance with Levinas's work, these articles should be of considerable interest. There is not a dull or unoriginal essay in the lot.

Notes

* Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley (eds.), *Re-Reading Levinas*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991.

- 1 Masculine pronouns will generally be used. A shift to feminine pronouns would represent a distortion that would obscure the thrust of feminist criticisms of Levinas to be discussed later.
- 2 The term Other will be capitalized when it is used to denote the other person as source of ethical value. Similarly, Saying will be capitalized when its special use in Levinas's philosophy is indicated. However, the said, even when used as a technical term, will be printed in lower case letters to distinguish it from Saying.

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THE RHETORIC OF FAILURE AND DECONSTRUCTION

Ewa Plonowska Ziarek

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Unmasking deconstruction: skepticism in disguise?

In this essay I argue that in order to understand the consequences of Jacques Derrida's theory of language, it is essential to rethink the relationship of his philosophy to skepticism.¹ The strategic return to the question of skepticism in the context of Derrida's work requires immediate justification because the very term "skepticism" is bound to evoke a long series of misreadings not only of deconstruction but also of postmodernism. When deconstruction is perceived as the most extreme manifestation of postmodernity, the very appearance of the term "skepticism" implies a strong and often reductive value judgment about the impasse, deadlock, or exhaustion of postmodern thinking: "postmodernism . . . [is] a continuation of the metaphysical skeptical tradition, reaching its dead end in deconstruction."² In the aftermath of French poststructuralism, the problem of skepticism is persistently raised in both philosophical and literary studies in order to dramatize the "paralyzing" consequences of the postmodern critiques of reason and the subject.³ Although the charge of skepticism is usually dismissed as a misreading of Derrida's thought, the very frequency of this misreading and its persistent recurrence requires critical explanation. I argue that the repetition of skepticism in the reception of deconstruction inadvertently points to the crucial and frequently untheorized problem in Derrida's work: to the *reinscription* of skepticism as an ethical, rather than epistemological, problem facing modernity. The focus on the critical revision of skepticism, I claim, allows us to move past the endless discussions of the impasse of postmodernity, the exhaustion of subjectivity, and the collapse of reason, and to articulate instead an alternative interpretation of poststructuralist discourse—an interpretation that would account for the crucial role of alterity in language.

In order to articulate the stakes of the revision of skepticism, I will contrast two very different ways of broaching the problem of skepticism within deconstruction: the first path, followed by many of Derrida's critics, serves the purpose of dismissing the critical force of poststructuralism by assimilating it into the classical skeptical challenge that philosophy knows how to refute; the second path, initiated by Emmanuel Levinas's response to Derrida, implies just the reverse—that the ethical consequences of Derrida's critique of logocentrism and the philosophy of the subject are perhaps incomprehensible without a prior reappraisal of skepticism. Depending on the way it is articulated, the relation between deconstruction and skepticism can serve, therefore, two different purposes. In the first case, the problem of skepticism sets up the contrast between the traditional picture of language as a reliable means of representation at the disposal of the subject and the deconstructive view in which language relinquishes this representative function and thus leaves the subject without any relationship to the external world. In the second case, skepticism is invoked in order to articulate the difference between language understood within the parameters of the subject and language conceived as an exposure to the other.

The difference between these two ways of articulating the connection between deconstruction and skepticism is crucial for understanding Derrida's place within postmodern critiques of reason. In particular, the contrast between representation and exposure to the other allows us to clarify the consequences of Derrida's attempt to dissociate language from the metaphysics of the subject. Thus, what is at stake in raising the issue of skepticism is not only a matter of settling a controversy within the reception of deconstruction but also an inquiry into the implications and dilemmas of the postmodern critiques of rationality. One of the most powerful criticisms addressed to deconstruction in particular, and to the postmodern critiques of reason in general, is the Habermasian claim that postmodern thought is caught in the inevitable aporia of the totalizing critique of reason destroying its own foundation—or, what he calls, a performative contradiction: "The totalizing self-critique of reason gets caught in a performative contradiction since subject centered reason can be convicted of being authoritarian in nature only by having recourse to its own tools."⁴ This aporia, which for Habermas illustrates the often unacknowledged impasse of postmodern thought generally, is not so different from the contradiction characteristic of the skeptical position.⁵ Both skepticism and postmodernism would be examples of a totalizing critique which, by questioning all philosophical positions, undercuts its own foundation. Indeed, Habermas himself suggests this similarity between the impasse of postmodernity and the aporias of skepticism by arguing that the critical unmasking of the subject-centered rationality leads to a pessimistic and skeptical attitude and, eventually, to the renunciation of philosophy for anthropological, psychological, historical, or literary methods.⁶

Habermas interprets these contradictions into which the totalizing critiques of reason fall as the most striking indication of the impasse of postmodern thought. Thus for him the postmodern critique of modernity is not only incapable of legitimating its own foundation but ultimately fails to overstep the bounds of the subject-centered rationality it claims to overcome. According to Habermas, deconstruction, as well as postmodern thinking in general, negates the paradigm of the subject in an abstract manner but does not provide any alternative in its place. By privileging Derrida's critique of Husserlian phenomenology over his engagement with Levinas, Habermas can argue that "even Derrida does not extricate himself from the constraints of the paradigm of the philosophy of the subject."⁷ This is the case because "Derrida does not take as his point of departure that nodal point at which the philosophy of language and of consciousness branch off, that is, the point where the paradigm of linguistic philosophy separates from that of philosophy of consciousness and renders the identity of meaning dependent upon the intersubjective practice."⁸

Following the perspective opened by Levinas's response to Derrida, I am going to argue that the critical reappraisal of skepticism within deconstruction provides an answer to both of the Habermasian objections. First, by focusing on the rhetoric of skeptical discourse, Levinas reinterprets the moment of contradiction as the temporal dissociation of the two irreducible modes of signification. Second, this double model of signification reenacted in the skeptical thesis demonstrates precisely where Derrida's philosophy separates itself from the philosophy of the subject by elaborating structures of language that enable the address and signification of the other. In the context of Derrida's writings on communication and community, it becomes clear, however, that this signification of alterity in his thought does not lead to a new paradigm of reason based on intersubjective understanding and mutual consensus that Habermas wants to propose as an alternative both to subject-centered rationality and its postmodern critiques. Rethinking the place of skepticism in Derrida's work can open, therefore, an alternative both to the aporias into which the critique of subject-centered rationality falls and to the new paradigm of rationality based on intersubjectivity.

Predictably, the question of skepticism was raised immediately after Derrida's famous lecture "Différance," presented to the Société Française de Philosophie in 1968, and has been "inappropriately" repeated ever since. This repetition of skepticism is a symptom of the inability to account for the paradoxical position (neither completely internal nor external) of Derrida's work within the philosophical tradition. When Derrida's work is interpreted as a continuation of skepticism, then deconstruction is inappropriately assimilated to the post-Kantian epistemology based on the claims of consciousness to the accurate representation of the external world—the tradition which, as Richard Rorty points out, continues to shape modern philosophy of language⁹—without inquiring into the ways deconstruction

precisely interrogates that tradition. Consequently, the trajectory of the arguments about the skepticism of deconstruction is quite predictable and familiar: such an interpretation usually starts with the claim that Derrida's critique of representation and linguistic reference destroys correspondence between words and things. Jay Cantor's attempt to characterize deconstruction as a linguistic version of classical skepticism is a typical example of such an argument:

Deconstruction is a version of skepticism which attacks the claim of consciousness that it has at its disposal a language that is representative of the world or even of itself. Signifiers cannot, deconstructive writers argue, be adequately, reliably, aligned with signifieds. Caught up in that play of differences which is the structuration of language, signifiers can never successfully reach out to their referents. . . . Deconstruction is a classical skeptical argument, recast using linguistic metaphors. What in the skeptic's argument is called *the world*, is here called *referents or signified*. . . . We cannot have them with the certainty that is meant to be provided by the foundational epistemologists' principles of adequation between representation and represented.¹⁰

Given the premises of this critique, it is not surprising that Derrida's philosophy is seen as a crippling version of linguistic immanence—that is, as a philosophy of language which leaves the subject without any meaningful relationship to the external world.

The related issues of the indeterminacy of meaning and the so-called free play of the signifier are usually interpreted as a consequence of the destruction of the referential grounding of language—once language is cut off from a correspondence to the external world, then there is nothing internal, no privileged signified or signifier, to secure the stability of meaning: "It is thus a skepticism concerning reference that makes it all too plausible for Derridians to propose an alternative meaning or use for the text. If language use lacks the stability of Kantian correspondence, then it may indeed be seen as perpetually self-referring, or as simply disseminating meaning."¹¹ Despite its superficial rhetoric of freedom (as in the "free play of the signifier") or despite its exaggerated investment in pleasure,¹² such an endless dissemination of meaning in conjunction with the critique of representation in fact implies the exact opposite, namely, the entrapment of consciousness in the sphere of textuality. No matter how "funny or sexy" (Rorty's terms) the practice of deconstruction might seem, Derrida's sober critics will not be seduced: "No appeal from text to world is allowed. *We are trapped* within the text and within our own interpretation of it."¹³ Thus the interpretations that posit deconstruction as a form of linguistic skepticism intend to demonstrate not only the impossibility of knowledge within the framework of Derrida's philosophy but also the inevitable enclosure of the speaking subject within

the immanence of textual space: "And for the deconstructionist, as for the skeptic, there comes a point at which the world drops out. It is converted not into a dream or a hallucination, but into a 'free-play of signifier.'" ¹⁴ Since the argument about linguistic imprisonment is meant to dramatize an overwhelming paralysis of the speaking subject, the reception of deconstruction as a form of skepticism implicitly corroborates the Habermasian thesis that deconstruction merely exhausts the paradigm of subjective reason without offering an alternative understanding of language in its place.

This tiring repetition of the charge of skepticism functions as an obsessive yet unsuccessful attempt to master the discursive disorder associated with postmodern critiques of reason. Because of its strong rhetorical force, the term skepticism promises to fix the premises of the discussion from the very start, to close the polemics in a decisive way. Yet, instead of drawing the firm boundaries of discourse, the repetition of skepticism reproduces the disorder it claims to master so that the very criteria according to which Derrida's work is contested break down or become insufficient. In the course of the heated discussions on deconstruction and skepticism, or deconstruction and postmodernism, the oppositions between representational and self-referential language, epistemological uncertainty and ethical obligation, internal and external critiques of reason, subject and the other, and finally, between logic and rhetoric, philosophy and literature become slippery and unmanageable. Thus, the issue of skepticism not only discloses a site of intense interrogation of Derrida's project but also reveals a strange discursive disorder—a disorder that testifies to the disturbing effects of what Derrida calls "the other and the other of language."

One of the most striking examples of this breakdown of the discursive categories and concepts is provided by Richard Rorty's interpretation of Derrida. Obviously, Rorty does not intend to assimilate deconstruction to skepticism; on the contrary, he suggests that to accuse Derrida of skepticism is to place him in the wrong philosophical tradition, so to speak—that is, precisely, to confuse deconstruction with post-Kantian language philosophy with its privilege of the subject and its concern with truth as the accuracy of representation. For Rorty it makes more sense to align deconstruction with the post-Hegelians and their notion of truth as a historical artifact emerging from intersubjective interpretation.¹⁵ "To understand Derrida, one must see his work as the latest development in this non-Kantian, dialectical tradition—the latest attempt of the dialecticians to shatter the Kantians' ingenious image of themselves as accurately representing how things really are."¹⁶ Since deconstruction questions the very parameters of the Kantian philosophy of the knowing subject, it can no longer be contained within the tradition of skepticism, even though Derrida's critique of representation makes it very tempting to do so: "One can easily conclude . . . that Derrida conceives his work as purely negative—deconstructing the metaphysics of presence in order to leave the texts bare, unburdened by the need to

represent.”¹⁷ Although the series of distinctions Rorty draws (between post-Kantian formalism and post-Hegelian historicism; between the correspondence and coherence theory of truth; and especially between the subjective and “intersubjective” notions of meaning and interpretation) remain useful in so far as they demonstrate the origin of the common misreading of deconstruction, his own placement of Derrida remains problematic.¹⁸

Specifically, the problematic alignment of Derrida with the post-Hegelians, with the coherence theory of truth, and with intersubjective interpretation surfaces with a particular force when Rorty attempts to account for the affirmative side of deconstruction.¹⁹ This inability to articulate the affirmative role of deconstruction stems from Rorty’s confusion of the task of representation with the question of linguistic responsibility. What Rorty sees at the core of Derrida’s “debunking of Kantian philosophy generally” is the notion that “language has responsibilities to something outside itself, that it must be ‘adequate’ to do its representative job.”²⁰ In a repetition of the Enlightenment’s demystifying gesture, deconstruction, according to Rorty, intends to remove the issues of responsibility and representation from the theory of language the way the previous generation of philosophers removed the discussion of God from epistemology. Rorty claims, however, that Derrida is not consistent enough in this project of demystification since the question of responsibility continues to occupy an important place in his philosophy. More comfortable with the “negative” aspect of deconstruction than with the “constructive, bad side of Derrida’s work,” Rorty cannot account for responsibility in any other way than as a residue of representation or as a new language game for the ineffable. What is problematic in this reading is that the question of responsibility and exteriority remains confined to the philosophy of the subject and is not understood, as Derrida and Levinas would have it, as an indication of the relation to the other. Thus, Rorty’s critique of Derrida’s affirmative side repeats the error he sees in the misconceptions of the negative side of deconstruction: he, too, fails to divorce responsibility from the philosophy of the subject and to reinterpret it in the context of the relationship to the other (the relationship that only imprecisely can be called “intersubjective”). Nonetheless, by illustrating only too well that the configuration of responsibility and alterity in Derrida’s work exceeds the very opposition between representation and pure textuality, Rorty’s essay can serve as a compelling diagnosis of the stakes in the discussion of deconstruction and skepticism.

As Derrida repeatedly argues, his problematization of reference does not lead to the immanence of the linguistic system but, on the contrary, aims to pose the question of the outside in a far more radical way than the principle of adequation allows:²¹

I never cease to be surprised by critics who see my work as a declaration that there is nothing beyond language, that we are imprisoned in

language; it is, in fact saying the exact opposite. The critique of logocentrism is above all else the search for the "other" and the "other of language."²²

Derrida's "search for 'the other' and 'the other of language'" clarifies in an important way both the proximity and difference between deconstruction and skepticism. Derrida admits certain affinities with skepticism in so far as he perceives skepticism to be one of the possible modes of attention to the limit of both subjectivity and rationality: "But is it not quite clear that the questioning of truth does not develop *within* philosophy? Within philosophy, empirical or skeptical discourses are incoherent and dissolve themselves, following a well-known schema. Nonetheless, the moments of empiricism and skepticism have always been moments of attention to difference. . . . One can see the empirical or skeptical moments of philosophy as moments when thought meets the philosophical limit and still presents itself as philosophy. That, perhaps, is the only weakness of skeptical or empiricist philosophy."²³ The proximity of deconstruction to the skeptical tradition lies therefore in an attempt to delineate a margin or a limit of rationality. However, whereas skepticism remains an immanent questioning of knowledge, Derrida's critique, in its search for the other of reason, surpasses the bounds of rationality. Rejecting the model of an internal criticism of reason (that Habermas finds to be a decisive feature of the dialectic of Enlightenment), Derrida searches for an "aside" of thinking, or a "non-philosophical site" from which to interrogate philosophy itself.

Obviously, Derrida's "search for the other of reason" is not unique to deconstruction since it is, as Habermas and Foucault argue in different ways, a characteristic feature of the postmodern epistémé.²⁴ Yet, both Habermas and Foucault conceive the other of reason—to which the postmodern thought refers as "courts of appeals"—primarily within the paradigm of divided subjectivity. The function of alterity in this context is to show the dependence of subjectivity on prior structures—either linguistic or libidinal—which remain inaccessible to rational thematization. In a manner similar to Foucault's famous analysis of "Man and his Doubles," Habermas claims that "it is the aesthetic, body-centered experiences of a decentered subjectivity that function as the placeholders for the other of reason."²⁵ Given this definition of alterity, it is not surprising that Habermas concludes that the postmodern discussions of the other of reason are forced to reinscribe the inside/outside topography of consciousness—that is, they collapse into the very language they claim to overcome. Yet, what this criticism fails to take into account is that for Derrida the other of reason does not merely function as impersonal linguistic structures or as the libidinal economy of the unconscious—both of which exceed the intentionality of consciousness.²⁶ In fact, as early as his 1968 seminal lecture "Différance," Derrida points to the necessity of supplementing the linguistic

and psychoanalytic conceptions of alterity with Levinas's unique articulation of the *face* of the other person: "A past that has never been present: this formula is the one that Emmanuel Levinas uses, although certainly not in a psychoanalytic way, to qualify the trace and the enigma of absolute alterity: the Other."²⁷ In order to understand the effects of this supplement, we need to turn to Levinas's discussion of skepticism in the context of the ethics of deconstruction. Levinas's original reformulation of the importance of skepticism will allow us not only to specify a notion of alterity irreducible to the thought of the decentered subject, but also to offer a linguistic solution to the problem of how the signification of the other is possible within philosophical conceptuality.

Levinas and Derrida: skepticism and the signification of alterity

Like many other critics of philosophical modernity, Levinas associates Western rationality and its models of signification with the privilege of presence and the subject: "the present of the theme, where the one and the other enter into signification or become significations, is correlative with a subject which is a consciousness."²⁸ Skepticism in this context presents for Levinas not only the exhaustion of subject-centered reason but also its displacement. In both Levinas's and Derrida's work, deconstruction of skepticism opens a way to dissociate language from the philosophy of the subject and to rethink the ethical signification of the other. Not merely an impasse of philosophical rationality, the significance of skepticism is reinterpreted, as Robert Bernasconi suggests, as an analogy of the incompatible significations generated in language at the moment it addresses the Other.²⁹ This suggests that for Levinas skepticism not so much negates the possibility of truth or subjectivity as it questions their primacy as philosophical concerns. According to Bernasconi, for Levinas "neither philosophy nor truth find their ultimate justification in themselves" but have to be subordinated to the ethical relation to alterity.³⁰

What is not often sufficiently emphasized is that this displacement of the primacy of the subject and truth stems from Levinas's critique of the internal relation between rationality and domination.³¹ Exposing the inherent connection between knowledge and power, Levinas, like many other critics of modernity, claims that by annulling the difference between the represented and its representation, the knowing subject both grasps and constitutes the object on its own terms, and therefore, obliterates its alterity: "It is a hold on being which equals a constitution of that being."³² Knowledge exercises power by neutralizing alterity and by encompassing it within the totality of the conceptual or linguistic system.³³ Consequently, if Levinas insists on the lack of correspondence, or lack of coincidence, between representation and the represented, it is not because of the failure of knowledge but rather

because of the critique of the unacknowledged complicity of its success with violence.

Examining the stakes of deconstruction in his 1973 essay "Wholly Otherwise," Levinas raises the issue of skepticism as an important linguistic problem in the context of the ethical, rather than the epistemological, implications of deconstruction.³⁴ Levinas accounts for the temptation to read Derrida as a skeptic and to show what such a reading covers over when it remains confined within the philosophy of the subject. As if responding to Habermas's objections to Derrida, he suggests that the temptation to read deconstruction as a continuation of skepticism arises, indeed, from an apparent contradiction in the deconstructive enterprise: on the one hand, deconstruction reveals "significations which do not have to comply with the summation of Knowledge" but, on the other, it has to express these significations within a logocentric conceptuality, that is, in a language very much committed to the "summation of Knowledge." As Derrida points out in "Violence and Metaphysics," Levinas's ethics is also implicated in the "risk" of a similar contradiction—a contradiction that stems from "the necessity of lodging oneself within traditional conceptuality in order to destroy it."³⁵

For Levinas, this seemingly inescapable incoherence is analogous to the contradiction which philosophy has always been eager to detect in the skeptical position. As the classical refutation of skepticism points out again and again, by denying the possibility of truth, the skeptical thesis negates all possible philosophical theses, including its own. This inherent self-contradiction in the skeptical position seems to mirror the predicament of deconstruction and, as Habermas argues, the aporias of postmodern totalizing critiques, which no longer posit the other as the repressed moment of reason but rather as a moment radically incompatible with rationality. As Levinas writes:

One might well be tempted to infer an argument from this use of logocentric language against that very language, in order to dispute the produced deconstruction: a path much followed by the refutation of skepticism, but where, although at first crushed and trampled underfoot, skepticism got back up on its feet to come back as the legitimate child of philosophy.³⁶

Yet, for Levinas the analogy between skepticism and Derrida's philosophy (and by extension, the analogy between skepticism and Levinas's ethics) does not serve the purpose of "disputing" deconstruction but rather provides an occasion for elucidating its linguistic predicament. The very "incoherence" of skepticism furnishes an example of a heteronomous position that is both inside and outside philosophy, that both respects and subverts philosophical language. Therefore the question that Levinas raises is how to articulate the shift from the logic of contradiction to a heteronomous mode of signification.

In a way similar to Cavell's approach, Levinas's revision of skepticism is not concerned with the arguments and counter-arguments traded between skepticism and philosophy but focuses instead on the unique model of signification re-enacted in skeptical discourse.³⁷ What is at the very core of Levinas's analysis here is the focus on contradiction in skeptical discourse and its reinterpretation in terms of the rhetoric of temporality. In order to see in skepticism the possibilities for a displacement of subject-centered reason, one needs to pay attention not only to the logic of the skeptical argument (which is refutable) but also to the temporal dissociation of two modes of signification. For Levinas, the moment that philosophy interprets as contradiction in fact enacts a double signification announcing not only a failure of knowledge but also a radical interruption or displacement of philosophical reason. Levinas claims that even though incommensurate, these two moments of discourse cannot be called contradictory because they are no longer simultaneous. In Levinas's interpretation, the logical error of contradiction in the skeptical position is reread as the rhetoric of temporality, or what he calls, irreducible diachrony:

But in following this path, one would risk missing one side of the signification which this inconsequence bears. One would risk missing the incompressible nonsimultaneity of the Said and the Saying, the dislocation of their correlation. . . . As if simultaneity were lacking from the two significations, so that the contradiction broke the knot that tied them together. As if the correlation of the Saying and the Said was a diachrony of that which can't be brought together.³⁸

Interpreted from the ethical perspective, skepticism illustrates an insurmountable dislocation (both temporal and spatial) of two different significations, or of what Levinas calls the Said and the Saying. The Said represents the unity and systematicity of propositional discourse, aiming at synchronizing and establishing relations between different terms. Encompassing the order of representation with its ideal of the correspondence between object and subject, things and language, the Said belongs to the order of subject-centered reason. The Saying, which interrupts and transcends the order of the Said, preserves the ethical relation to alterity, the non-thematizable exposure of the subject to the other. What emerges from this contrast between the Saying and the Said, familiar for Levinas's scholars, is a rather surprising, and frequently overlooked, interpretation of rhetoric. Irreducible to "referential aberration," Levinas's turn to rhetoric reveals a disjunction between the epistemological and the ethical, or between the negative and the affirmative, significance of linguistic instability.

In a manner similar to Cavell, Levinas suggests that the signification of skepticism is not absorbed by its explicit negative thesis (the order of the Said), that the "truth" of skepticism (its Saying) is incommensurate with

"the truth whose interruption and failure its discourse states."³⁹ In this double reading of the skeptical discourse, the failure or impossibility of knowledge is intertwined, though not simultaneous, with the ethical affirmation of otherness:

Skepticism, which traverses the rationality or logic of knowledge, is a refusal to synchronize the implicit affirmation contained in saying and the negation that this affirmation states in the said. The contradiction is visible to reflection, which refutes it, but skepticism is insensitive to the refutation, as though the affirmation and negation did not resound in the same time.

(OB, 167–68)

Levinas's reappraisal of skepticism intends to displace the primacy of the epistemological quest for the legitimation of knowledge in order to reveal the prior ethical responsibility for the other. He suggests, therefore, that philosophy has misread, or disregarded, the formidable challenge of skepticism: "The permanent return of skepticism does not so much signify the possible breakup of structures as the fact that they are not the ultimate framework of meaning" (OB, 171). Consequently, the affirmation implicit in skepticism points to the transcendence of the philosophy of consciousness—it reveals the signification of the other that cannot be recuperated within the coherence of rational discourse. By refusing to acknowledge this moment of affirmation, "the history of Western philosophy has not been the refutation of skepticism as much as the refutation of transcendence" (OB, 169). Levinas's interpretation of Derrida implies, therefore, that to refute deconstruction by assimilating it to traditional skepticism is to repeat the refusal of transcendence and alterity.

How does this reappraisal of skepticism bear, according to Levinas, on our assessment of deconstruction, and, especially, on the function of the rhetoric of failure within deconstructive discourse? The parallels that Levinas draws among ethics, skepticism, and deconstruction reveal a double discourse in which the *representation* of the other is put into question by the *response* to the other. To think the relation between deconstruction and skepticism in this way is to attend first of all to the double signification of the interruption of linguistic totality: to its affirmative and negative moments, to diachrony and synchrony, to transcendence and immanence, to the impossibility of knowledge and the possibility of ethical responsibility. In remarking the diachronic dislocations in the texts it reads, deconstruction, in a manner parallel to skepticism, attends to "the interruptions of the discourse found again and recounted in the immanence of the said . . . conserved like knots in a thread tied again, the trace of a diachrony that does not enter into the present, that refuses simultaneity" (OB, 170). Far from advocating "the text without exit," Derrida advances an idea of textuality

open to and emerging from a ceaseless exchange with exteriority. In his later essay on Levinas, "At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am," Derrida describes this concept of textuality as *sérialité*: as a series of interruptions, which, although tied again by the continuity of discourse, leave nonetheless the traces of the encounter with the other to be read.⁴⁰ What is important in the context of the debate on deconstruction and skepticism, is that Derrida not only addresses the problem of exteriority as one of the most pressing issues in deconstruction but also accuses philosophy of "failing" to respond to it: this "failure" of response is, paradoxically, coextensive with the "success" of a philosophical knowledge of the other.

One of the main concerns of Derrida's texts is an inquiry into how the coherence of discourse is produced at the expense of otherness and whether this coherence can be dislocated in order to allow for a different relation with exteriority.⁴¹ Derrida argues that by thinking the other as its own proper margin or its proper referent, philosophy, in the extreme "autism" of subject-centered reason, is never surprised or disturbed by its outside: it is "a discourse that organizes the *economy* of its representation, the law of its proper weave, such that *its* outside is never its *outside*, never surprises it, such that the logic of its heteronomy still reasons from within the vault of its autism."⁴² Such a conceptual determination of exteriority is calculated to secure the possibility of thinking the other. In a mode similar to the Levinasian critique of metaphysics, Derrida maintains, however, that thinking the other as one's own proper limit amounts, precisely, to "missing it":

To insist upon thinking its other: its proper other, the proper of its other, an other proper? In thinking it as such, in recognizing it, one misses it. One reappropriates it for oneself, one disposes of it, one misses it, or rather one misses (the) missing (of) it," which, as concerns the other always amounts to the same.⁴³

This critique of the philosophy of the subject mirrors uncannily some of the charges leveled against Derrida's own texts. However, if interpretations of deconstruction as a form of skepticism maintain that the deconstructive critique of representation destroys any relation to exteriority (exteriority understood in this case as a stable referent arresting the play of signification),⁴⁴ Derrida claims in turn that one misses the exteriority of the other precisely by recognizing and representing it.

The contrast between two different ways of locating the inscription of skepticism within deconstruction illuminates the implications of Derrida's attempt to divorce the theory of language from the philosophy of the subject. It is not only the case that, as Habermas claims, Derrida's theory of language deconstructs the concept of the knowing subject by emphasizing the endless play of differences and signifiers (the play that exceeds the efforts of consciousness to arrest meaning)—Derrida also addresses the responsibility

language bears to something other than itself and questions how this responsibility could be articulated. No longer exhausted, or even commensurate, with the task of representation or knowledge of the other, this responsibility is linked in Derrida's theory of language with the pre-performative force of the address to the other. It is by elaborating the scope of the responsibility tied to the signification of alterity that Derrida deconstructs the notion of linguistic immanence and eventually extends this critique to the nostalgic visions of social immanence, constitutive of discursive community.

Notes

- 1 The longer version of this argument is presented in my book *The Rhetoric of Failure: Deconstruction of Skepticism, Reinvention of Modernism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995).
- 2 This particular quotation has appeared in the recent SUNY Press advertisement of Don Byrd's new book, *The Poetics of the Common Knowledge*.
- 3 For this kind of assessment, see for instance Eugene Goodheart, *The Skeptic Disposition in Contemporary Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984). For other examples of reading deconstruction in terms of skepticism, see, for instance, Charles Altieri, *Act and Quality* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981), pp. 26–28; C. Butler, "Deconstruction and Skepticism," in *Interpretation, Deconstruction and Ideology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984); Jay Cantor, "On Stanley Cavell," *Raritan* 1 (1981): 50–51; Michael Fisher, *Stanley Cavell and Literary Skepticism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), pp. 1–9, 30–35; and S. J. Wilmore, "Skepticism and Deconstruction," *Man and World* 20 (1987): 437–55. For a critique of this reception, see A. J. Cascardi, "Skepticism and Deconstruction," *Philosophy and Literature* 8 (1984): 1–14, and Christopher Norris, *Derrida* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), pp. 142–61.
- 4 Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), p. 185.
- 5 For an illuminating critique of Habermas's reading of postmodernity, see George A. Trey, "The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Habermas's Postmodern Adventure," *Diacritics* 19 (1989): 67–79. For a similar critique in the context of both literary and philosophical history, see Rainer Nägele, "Modernism and Postmodernism: The Margins of Articulation," *Studies in Twentieth Century Literature* 5 (1980): 5–25. See also Domick LaCapra, "Habermas and the Grounding of Critical Theory," *History and Theory* 16 (1977). For an interesting discussion of the place of Habermas in relation to Lyotard and Wittgenstein, see Albrecht Wellmer, "On the Dialectic of Modernism and Postmodernism," trans. David Roberts, *Praxis International* 4 (1985): 337–61.
- 6 Habermas sees the pessimistic skeptical attitude as one of the two possible outcomes of the postmodern critique of reason. The other strategy lies in some version of *Ursprungsphilosophie*, which proclaims "the possibility of a critique of metaphysics that digs up the roots of metaphysical thought without, however, itself giving up philosophy." *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, p. 97.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 166.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 172.
- 9 Richard Rorty, "Philosophy as a Kind of Writing: An Essay on Derrida," in his *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), pp. 91–95.

- 10 Jay Cantor, "On Stanley Cavell" *Raritan* 1 (1981): 50–51.
- 11 Christopher Butler, *Interpretation, Deconstruction and Ideology*, p. 86.
- 12 For a critique of the "exaggerated hedonism" of deconstruction, see Michael Fisher, *Stanley Cavell and Literary Skepticism*, pp. 19–20. Sometimes the pleasure in the text is seen as an expression of skepticism in itself—a kind of pyrrhonic happiness stemming from the suspension of rational judgment. S. J. Wilmore, "Skepticism and Deconstruction," p. 437.
- 13 Butler, p. 86.
- 14 A. J. Cascardi, "Skepticism and Deconstruction," p. 3.
- 15 For a nuanced account of the proximity and distance between différance and dialectical difference (the distance that Rorty does not acknowledge), see for instance John Llewelyn, "A Point of Almost Absolute Proximity to Hegel," in John Sallis, ed., *Deconstruction and Philosophy: The Texts of Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 87–95. As Llewelyn points out, "the conflict of forces that goes by the pseudonym différance, as opposed to the conflict of positions in dialectical contradiction, refuses incorporation . . . into the encyclopedia and is refused for the phenomenology of spirit" (*ibid.*, p. 87).
- 16 Richard Rorty, "Philosophy as a Kind of Writing," p. 93. For a succinct discussion of the relation between Derrida and pragmatism, see Norris, *Derrida*, pp. 150–55.
- 17 Rorty, "Philosophy as a Kind of Writing," p. 99.
- 18 See, for instance, the Habermasian argument that whereas the Hegelian dialectic sets up the possibility of the internal critique of modernity, Derrida abandons the project of modernity altogether. *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, pp. 302–06.
- 19 For a critique of Rorty's reduction of Derrida's philosophical concerns to the style of "comic writing," see for instance, Derek Attridge, "Derrida and the Questioning of Literature," in Derek Attridge, ed., *Acts of Literature* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 12. See also Drucilla Cornell, *Transformations: Recollective Imagination and Sexual Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 4, and Roger Bell "Rorty on Derrida: A Discourse of Simulated Moderation," in Arleen B. Dallery, Charles E. Scott and P. Holley Roberts, eds., *Ethics and Danger: Essays on Heidegger and Continental Thought* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), pp. 283–300.
- 20 Rorty, p. 100.
- 21 Derrida protests here that deconstructive critique of reference does not amount to the "idealism of the text" but at the same time argues against a simple alternative of "the materialist text": "It is not always in *the* materialist text (is there such a thing, *the* materialist text?) nor in *every* materialist text that the concept of matter has been defined as absolute exterior or radical heterogeneity." *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: the University of Chicago Press, 1972), p. 64.
- 22 Jaques Derrida, "Deconstruction and the Other," in Richard Kearney, ed., *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), pp. 123–24.
- 23 Jacques Derrida, "The Original Discussion of 'Différance,'" in *Derrida and Différance*, p. 93.
- 24 See in particular, Michael Foucault, "Man and His Doubles," *The Order of Things: An Archeology of Human Sciences* (New York: Random House, 1973), pp. 303–43.
- 25 Habermas, p. 306.
- 26 For an illuminating discussion of the difference between the psychological and linguistic formulation of "the Other of reason," see Albrecht Wellmer, "On the Dialectic of Modernism and Postmodernism," p. 352.

- 27 Jacques Derrida, "Différance," in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 21. Although it is beyond the scope of this essay, the question remains whether Derrida is successful in negotiating these three different forms of alterity. This is indeed the question Robert Bernasconi poses at the end of his "The Trace of Levinas in Derrida": "The question remains whether Derrida, in being deaf to the ethinical voice of saying, does not fail to do justice to all the possibilities of language to which Levinas has introduced us." *Derrida and Différance*, p. 27.
- 28 Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1981), p. 165.
- 29 For an excellent discussion of the significance of skepticism for Levinas's approach to language, see Robert Bernasconi, "Skepticism in the Face of Philosophy," in Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley, eds., *Re-Reading Levinas* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), pp. 150–61.
- 30 Bernasconi, "Skepticism in the Face of Philosophy," p. 151.
- 31 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), p. 27.
- 32 Emmanuel Levinas, "Ethics as the First Philosophy," trans. Seán Hand and Michael Temple, *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Seán Hand (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p. 79.
- 33 For an insightful discussion of the exteriority of the other, see John Llewelyn, "Levinas, Derrida and Others Vis-à-vis," in Robert Bernasconi and David Wood, eds., *Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other* (New York: Routledge, 1988), pp. 145–49.
- 34 The exchange between Levinas and Derrida is one of the central issues in both Levinas and Derrida scholarship (in particular, the scholarship concerned with Derrida's later works). Most of this criticism is concerned with the possibility of ethics in deconstruction whereas I focus here on the linguistic relation between ethics and skepticism. For illuminating discussions of the encounter between Derrida and Levinas, see, for instance, Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992); Robert Bernasconi, "Deconstruction and the Possibility of Ethics," in *Deconstruction and Philosophy*, pp. 122–39; "The Trace of Levinas in Derrida," in *Derrida and Différance*, pp. 13–29, and "Levinas and Derrida: The Question of the Closure of Metaphysics," in Richard A. Cohen, ed., *Face to Face with Levinas* (Albany: SUNY, 1986), pp. 181–202; Drucilla Cornell, *The Philosophy of the Limit*, pp. 62–90; John Llewelyn, *Beyond Metaphysics? The Hermeneutic Circle in Contemporary Continental Philosophy* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1985), pp. 186–206; Adriaan Peperzak, "Some Remarks on Hegel, Kant, and Levinas," in *Face to Face with Levinas*, pp. 205–17.
- 35 Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 111.
- 36 Emmanuel Levinas, "Wholly Otherwise," trans. Simon Critchley, in *Re-Reading Levinas*, p. 5.
- 37 For Stanley Cavell's rethinking of skepticism, see *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 7–45.
- 38 Emmanuel Levinas, "Wholly Otherwise," pp. 5–6.
- 39 Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), pp. 168. Subsequent references to this edition will be marked parenthetically in the text.

- 40 As Derrida writes: "this lace of obligation holds language. It maintains, preventing it from falling apart in passing through the eyelets of a texture: alternatively inside and outside, below and above, before and beyond." "At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am," trans. Ruben Berezdivin, in *Re-Reading Levinas*, p. 30.
- 41 The concern with the signification of the other, in both the ethical and political context, is more readily associated with Derrida's later texts. See for instance "The Politics of Friendship," *The Journal of Philosophy* 85 (1988): 632-44; "Psyche: Inventions of the Other," trans. Catherine Porter, in Lindsay Waters and Wlad Godzich, eds., *Reading de Man Reading* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), pp. 25-65; and "Otobiographies: The Teaching of Nietzsche and the Politics of the Proper Name," trans. Avital Ronell, in *The Ear of the Other*, ed. Christie McDonald (Lincoln: University of Nebraska press, 1985), pp. 1-38. My point here, however, is that even Derrida's earlier texts, those most frequently read in terms of skepticism, demonstrate this concern with alterity equally strongly.
- 42 Jacques Derrida, "Tympan," in *Margins of Philosophy*, p. xvi.
- 43 Ibid., pp. xi-xii.
- 44 For this widespread view, see S. J. Wilmore, "Skepticism and Deconstruction," pp. 437-55.