



2007

THE INFINITE AS ORIGINATIVE OF THE  
HUMAN AS HUMAN: A  
TRANSCENDENTAL  
PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLICATION OF  
THE PHILOSOPHY OF EMMANUEL  
LEVINAS

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

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The Graduate School

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the  
College of Arts and Sciences  
At the University of Kentucky

By  
Ronald Lynn Mercer, Jr.

Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Dr. Ronald Bruzina, Professor of Philosophy

Lexington, Kentucky

2007

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## ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

### THE INFINITE AS ORIGINATIVE OF THE HUMAN AS HUMAN: A TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLICATION OF THE PHILOSOPHY OF EMMANUEL LEVINAS

Few philosophers, today, are doing more than simple recognition of Levinas's debt to phenomenology when a thorough explication of how phenomenological methodology impacts Levinas's work is needed. This dissertation is the needed discussion of methodology that has been so absent in Levinas as well as in so many of his interpreters. The purpose, herein, is to synthesize Levinas's work, explicating it in terms of transcendental methodology, the result of which reveals Levinas's claims to be more defensible when understood in these terms than when the full rigor of this methodology is not properly grasped.

First, to connect Levinas to transcendental phenomenology a correct perspective of the phenomenological tradition is needed. I argue that phenomenology is a methodology that discloses those horizons that condition experience such that appearance takes on meaning. I further argue that it is important to see this disclosure as something open-ended and ongoing rather than a method capable of fully revealing a final telos. Levinas fits into this methodology by providing the ethical as just such a horizontal condition, while his constant returning to this theme highlights the need to keep re-working the description of its meaningful impact on experience.

Second, I defend Levinas from those who claim his work cannot be phenomenological, based on what they see as an implied Jewish tradition informing his description. I argue that what must be understood is that Levinas's reference to God, Biblical stories, and Jewish wisdom impose an unsettling language that is introduced to replace traditional phenomenological language that does not always allow for the goals phenomenology sets for itself. This imposition does not use the Jewish tradition to make his argument but as a vocabulary far better at describing the ethical condition than what is commonly used in phenomenology.

The final step of explication involves the actual application of the methodology, now understood aright, to Levinas's claims about the other, the self, and the ethical. The result is that once we understand the ethical as the infinite originative horizon out of which the conscious ego emerges, later interpretations of Levinas will be able to successfully move beyond his work.

KEY WORDS: Emmanuel Levinas, Phenomenology, Philosophy of Religion,  
Ethics, Continental Philosophy

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February 21, 2007

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DISSERTATION

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Je n'ai jamais traité de l'infini que pour me soumettre à lui.  
- Descartes

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

With deepest gratitude and the utmost respect, I wish to thank Dr. Ronald Bruzina for his insight, guidance, and patience. Without his expertise, this dissertation would not have been possible. I would also like to show my appreciation for Dr. Oliver Leaman, whose instruction in two independent study courses has achieved its final form in chapter two of this present work. I would also be remiss if I did not give thanks to Dr. Dan Frank, who gave of his own personal time to read through Levinas's Nine Talmudic Readings with me. Finally, allow me to extend my gratitude to all the members of my dissertation committee for their encouragement and support: Ronald Bruzina, Oliver Leaman, Ted Schatzki, Chris Zurn, Ernest Yanarella, and Michael Samers.

In addition to the academic support I received from those already mentioned, allow me to thank my wife, Jessica, for her love and support as well as my parents, Ronald and Sarah, for their wisdom and their faith.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments _____	iii
List of Files _____	vi
Chapter One: What Should We Say about Levinas? _____	1
Chapter Two: Phenomenological Groundwork _____	12
Introduction _____	12
Levinas’s Education in Historical Context _____	14
Phenomenology 101: Basic Ideas of Edmund Husserl _____	19
Levinas and Heideggerian Phenomenology _____	35
Derrida, Levinas, and Heideggerian Ontology _____	51
Levinas and the “Spirit” of Phenomenology _____	59
Chapter Three: Levinas and Judaism: The Possibility of a Religious Phenomenology _____	71
Introduction _____	71
Levinas in Cultural, Religious Context _____	76
The Greek and the Hebrew _____	79
Levinas and Hebrew Texts _____	87
The Influence of Jewish Philosophers _____	95
“God” and Phenomenological Religion _____	101
Phenomenological Religion Reapplied to a Jewish Context _____	111
Chapter Four: Ontic Reparations _____	125
Introduction _____	125
Imprisoned in Totality: The Heideggerian Legacy _____	126
The Other: Which Infinity are We Talking About? _____	148
Totality AND Infinity _____	170
Chapter Five: Infinity at the Origin _____	188
Introduction _____	188
Language as Communication and Exposure _____	192
Temporality and Sensibility at the Beginning _____	199
Substitution as Phenomenological Construction for Infinite Origination _____	209
Substitution is What? _____	212
Substitution as Transcendental Construction _____	214
Levinas, the Human, and the Holy _____	228
Chapter Six: What Can We Do with Levinas? _____	238
Introduction _____	238
Henry, God, and Absolute Life _____	243
A Levinasian Corrective _____	251
References _____	255



LIST OF FILES

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **What Should We Say about Levinas?**

Emmanuel Levinas begins Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence with the following dedication:

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 anti-Semitism.<sup>1</sup>

If anything should be said about Levinas, it must be that he hoped, in some small way, to speak a word of hope to the pain of the world in the wake of the atrocities of Nazi fascism. In the year 1939, Levinas, a naturalized French citizen, was drafted and fought against the German invasion as a member of the French Tenth Army. After the Tenth's capture by German forces, he was put to hard labor at Hanover, Germany, as a prisoner of war, escaping the fate of so many Jews in Germany by virtue of the fact that Hitler observed the provisions governing the treatment of prisoners of war written at the Geneva Convention. With the war having ended, Levinas set to his word of hope with the tool he had been honing for the past two decades: philosophy. The first publications after his release, Time and the Other and Existence and Existents, set down the basic direction that would be his journey until his death in 1995, a phenomenology of human life with an ever watchful eye for the origin of ethics. From these first steps, we realize that Levinas's word of hope is not simply a backward-looking expression of shared grief and desire for a more peaceful future but rather a promise to take on the Herculean task of finding the beginnings of the human as human, which are the beginnings of the human as

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<sup>1</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), v.

humane. From this ground, one can see a forward-looking vision that hopes beyond hope to begin a journey towards a more ethical eschaton for not only those closest to the Holocaust but for all victims who have been alienated and hated.

Many readers of Levinas might find the difficulty of his philosophy to be less than consoling. Words of hope should be emotionally uplifting, and to be beaten down with the weight of unusual vocabulary couched in a phenomenological methodology hardly seems fair. Nevertheless, the search for an origin requires tremendous digging, but when the origin happens to be a condition of life rather than a simple object in life, then the search requires tremendous phenomenological digging. This dissertation serves as an explication of the intense mining operation Levinas has undertaken. While simple explication may hardly be something that justifies a dissertation, some would be grateful for any work that adds in some small measure to the comprehensibility of the Levinasian corpus. Truly, most neophyte readers would find Levinas's paradoxical claims maddening: 1. somehow the Ethical has nothing to do with determining ethics but everything to do with making ethics possible; 2. somehow the other has everything to do with the person standing before me (face-to-face) but has nothing to do with anything I might know about the person right before my eyes; 3. somehow God, who absolutely retains ineffability for Levinas, becomes a central figure for a phenomenological methodology that supposedly begins from all the things we experience as effable. Regardless of whatever comprehension I might add, the explication to come cannot simply translate difficult language into simpler language. Such a translation cannot be done at all. These paradoxical difficulties and the impossibility of simplification have led several commentators to wonder whether or not Levinas is doing phenomenology at all –



perhaps it is some mystical theology trumped up in phenomenological language. I was recently asked at a conference at Villanova if I *still* thought Levinas was doing phenomenology. The answer is a resounding, Yes! What is so often sorely misunderstood is the phenomenological problematic with which Levinas is working. In short, he intends to uncover a lost horizon of the subject that conditions the human being and prepares for the very possibility of ethics; however, such conditions are always constitutive of the meaningfulness of my experiences and not proper objects of my experience (this theme will be oft repeated). My explication is aimed much more at explicating what Levinas is attempting to do on the whole as it is with what he means according to chapter and verse.

Let us begin with a brief introduction to some of the most common Levinasian themes. For Emmanuel Levinas, the very event of being is first a response, an answer to that which is always, already there but is also always, already beyond being, transcendent to the ego that capitulates. Levinas begins his philosophy from the event of being, being in its verbal sense, and ends with the emergence of the “devoting-of-oneself-to-the-other,” and in so doing, the “human, as such, begins.”<sup>2</sup> In this one quote concerning the event of the coming and becoming of the human as human, I began to see Levinas’s work in a new light and discovering how he discusses the origination of the human, as such, will remain my theme throughout.

In order to grasp the verbal point of origination for human being, Levinas investigates the relationship the self has with the other, an other that cannot be reduced to

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<sup>2</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “Preface,” in Entre Nous: Thinking of the Other, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), xii.

theoretical knowledge, an other that must always remain outside the confines of ontology.<sup>3</sup> While commentators have often described Levinas's philosophy as a philosophy of otherness, it does not help that this simple word, other, is used by Levinas in a variety of different ways. Perhaps the least important to his philosophy is the recognition that the "I" can be an other to itself.<sup>4</sup> Each person goes through many alterations in life such that one can say, "I am not the same person I was yesterday, a year ago, or even moments ago." These different aspects or phases of life can be distinguished as other than what the ego now is. This otherness, however, is always rightly reduced to the ego, for "the I is identical in its very alterations. It represents them to itself and thinks them."<sup>5</sup> Consequently, "the difference is not a difference; the I, as other is not an 'other.'"<sup>6</sup>

More important for Levinas's philosophy, and yet, more problematic, is when he uses the term "other" to refer to an undisclosable transcendence. At this early stage in our investigation, the best way to broach the question about ways to speak about an unspeakable otherness is to look at the word choice he makes in indicating the unsayable other. Levinas discusses the other (*autre*), the absolutely other (*l'absolument autre*), and

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<sup>3</sup> Let us make a passing note that I have not haphazardly placed in parallel a "reduction to theoretical knowledge" and the "confines of ontology" in this sentence. Levinas suggests a strong link between the two, a congruence, that philosophy done in theoretical terms first draws the confines of ontological philosophy in such a way that within them the entirety of human experience is not circumscribed and, second, attempts to marginalize out or subsume into the circumscription this remainder of human experience.

<sup>4</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1961), 37.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

the personal other (*autrui*).<sup>7</sup> When Levinas uses *autre*, only context can tell if he is alluding to transcendent otherness. When he discusses being an other to oneself, the non-transcendent variety, he employs *autre*. Often, in order to clarify the usage of *autre*, he adds on the appellation of *l'absolument*, eliminating the equivocation and purposefully referencing an otherness otherwise than being. Unfortunately, as soon as it seems that the confusion may be resolved, Levinas once again makes a problematic equation: “*L'Absolument Autre, c'est Autrui.*” What is obviously problematic about this equation is that one must question why the personal other does not appear before the ego. It becomes immediately apparent that what is truly other about the other person is what is in fact personal to the other and can never be brought into the phenomenal world of a watching ego. Otherness, then, does not appear because it is not present in the manner of objectification. What Levinas can discuss is the nature of the subject and the subject's relation to the other. The subject, then, always finds one's ego confronted by the otherness of the person, an otherness that demands an ethical response.

The next question is how the person before me places a demand upon me by being other than I. In what Levinas will identify as the mainstream philosophical understanding, my ego imposes a totality that allows for whatever confronts me to be subsumed under my theoretical eye and to destroy, consequently, otherness. The face of the other, however, always signifies that which cannot be subsumed. The other is always

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<sup>7</sup> “Autre” and “Autrui” are both rightly translated as other, but the personal nature of the second is not easily conveyed. In an attempt at making a distinction, Alphonso Lingis, in his translation of *Totality and Infinity*, capitalized “Other” in reference to “Autrui” and left “other” uncapitalized when referring to “autre.” This convention hinders as much as it helps. Lingis changed his practice for his translation of *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* and left all instances of “other” in the lower case. I prefer to follow his later practice and have altered other translations accordingly.

there and demands its right to be so. Attending to the otherness implied by the face of another human being discloses the ethical relationship, a relationship that can never be satiated. No amount of attention will be enough; no amount of response will be sufficient. In this sense, the ethical relationship is infinite, for the task of respecting otherness is always incomplete; it is the infinite task that is imposed in facing the face.

Finally, we must understand something of the sense of the human. If we intend our investigation to uncover the nature of the human as human, then we might expect a series of hypothetical definitions which could be tested and then discarded or affirmed according to the results of our analysis. With a look at Levinas's major themes as already indicated, we should understand the human as being intricately tied to ethics and to others. Indeed, the terms "humanity" and "humane," which all rely upon a person's relationship to an ethical principle, reflect the idea that the "human" is somehow defined by the ethical. However, phenomenology attempts to go back to the things themselves without preconceptions, which necessitates that we not begin with any set of definitions for the human. Instead, we will see how Levinas himself exemplifies this approach, only being able to offer something like a definition in his later works, but any hope for a formal definition of the Aristotelian sort should be abandoned post haste. While the conditions of the human as human will indicate an ethical demand at the origin of the human as human, this very basis will not work anything like a rigid rule. Consequently, we must put away hopes of a hard and fast definition in favor of an understanding that can only be indicated in the fullness of our explication.

As a consequence of the difficulty of Levinas's problematic, my dissertation will traverse the same ground numerous times but with the effect of making each pass a fresh

look at increasingly familiar material. The first pass will be a question of methodology, asking whether Levinas has truly understood and applied the fundamental teachings of phenomenology or whether his philosophy is nothing more than theology in disguise. After answering yes to the first and no to the second, we will start over with Levinas to investigate the content upon which the phenomenological methodology is focused. This does not mean that the question of method will be easily addressed nor finally addressed in the chapter on phenomenology. Levinas's association with methodology has always been more implicit than explicit, arguing that too much good philosophy was not written on account of some authors' over heightened infatuation with writing about method. His resulting stance to avoid writing much about methodology is certainly frustrating, even for those who find serious value in his work, but it should not come as any surprise since Levinas feels as though there is no "transparency possible in method."<sup>8</sup> Consequently, we will have to tweak our conclusions in the first chapter as our discourse on content leads us into an ever broader and deeper understanding of Levinas's implicit method. What this second pass into content will reveal is that once we have fully explicated Levinas's phenomenology, we will realize that the question of theology returns, not as something insidiously hidden but as a question to which one must return once the origin of the human is explicated.

Chapter one, "Phenomenological Groundwork," attempts to unravel the mystery of Levinas's involvement with phenomenology, which he obfuscates by acknowledging his already mentioned distaste of overdoing method as well as his assertion that he

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<sup>8</sup> See Levinas's comments in "Questions and Answers," in Of God Who Comes to Mind, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 86 ff. beginning with Theodore de Boer's question.

follows the spirit of phenomenology if not the letter of its law. The latter obscuring principle, of course, assumes, on the part of Levinas, that phenomenology has a strict law to which it must adhere. In order to place Levinas back within phenomenology's fold, I will undertake a softening of the view that phenomenology is a rigid structure on the one hand and that Levinas's philosophy is a liberal use of the system along the lines of a smorgasbord from which he has only chosen bits and pieces, ignoring some of the most fundamental issues. In fact, what we will see is that Levinas's approach to phenomenology is most affected by the thrust and parry of the Husserl/Heidegger disagreements, lending to him the notion that Husserl's basic methodology is still something to be challenged. What makes Levinas such a keen student of Husserl and phenomenology is not that he finds much to be criticized in Husserl's work but that he finds many answers to his critiques within Husserl himself. That Husserl can be used against (or perhaps better, upon) Husserl suggests the softening of any rigid law in phenomenology, while Levinas's ability to discern these tensions for a broader and deeper understanding of phenomenology suggests his proper inclusion as a phenomenological thinker.

Even if we can successfully argue that Levinas uses phenomenological methodology, his willingness to make reference to God brings into question whether or not the method has been properly applied given Husserl's own apparent proscription against discussing God as manifest phenomenon.<sup>9</sup> References to God are neither few nor insignificant such that one might simply ignore them as stylistic. The very heart of

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<sup>9</sup> Edmund Husserl, Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy – First Book: General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology, trans. F. Kersten (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1982), §58.

Levinas's claim takes shape in the language of religion. The I, itself, as that which is not self caused but which has an independent view of the world capable of constructing the totality Levinas finds to be at the root of the unethical is described as "atheistic": "By atheism we thus understand a position prior to both the negation and the affirmation of the divine, the breaking with participation by which the I posits itself as the same and as I."<sup>10</sup> The origin of the human as ethical stands in sharp contrast to the atheistic orientation of the I insofar as the transcendent other provides the very condition for the ethical, calling the ego to ethics from a dimension of moral height as though from the divine, making the foundation of ethics a primordial tying together (etymologically, a primordial religion). The questions, then, for chapter two, "Levinas and Judaism," is whether or not Levinas has made God an object for phenomenological study and whether or not he has employed a pre-supposed Judaic theology in his descriptions of the ethical relation. Either would disqualify his philosophy as properly phenomenological. However, our argument will clearly demonstrate such concerns, while understandable from the phraseology, are unfounded and in some sense an attempt at avoiding the greater pitfall of ontology.

Ontology, *dasein*, absolute consciousness, and the same all represent for Levinas philosophy's inability to properly deal with ethics, in view of the fact that these concepts subsume creatures under a greater, comprehensive totality, erasing difference, uniqueness, and otherness. Even in his earliest writings, when explicating phenomenology in order to deliver the philosophy to France was his primary goal, there are hints of a discomfort with the tendency of phenomenology to search for those

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<sup>10</sup> Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 58.

conditions that brought an adequation between individual things and thought or between things and being because the dichotomy appeared to Levinas to prefer thought and being over the individual, de-valuing the individual. Chapter three, then, will be a discussion of the way in which Levinas attempts “Ontic Reparations.” The move to re-value or re-deem the ontic individual will move us away from primarily methodological considerations into an explication of the concrete. The move will also delineate the hard and fast distinction Levinas draws between his own work and the work of Martin Heidegger, whose stint with the Nazi party was one anecdote of the misconceptions an ontologically oriented philosophy could produce. As re-valued, the ontic other, no longer adequately defined in totality, can be seen as constitutive of the I in the manner of a transcendental, sometimes named a quasi-transcendental.

The final chapter, “Infinite Constitution,” pieces together all the advances we can make in method and concrete description as we culminate our explication with an argument for how to understand the centerpiece of Levinas’s second, which was also his last, major work. The concept of substitution, which names the constitutive horizon of the human that gives rise to the human as ethical – as human, moves the focus of Levinas’s philosophy from its previous focus on the transcendent other to the forgotten horizon of the individual. This move necessitates a brief encounter with another phenomenological thinker that has had a greater influence on Levinas than what many writers have given credit: Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy offered Levinas a better understanding of the constructive element of transcendental phenomenology such that Levinas’s own worries concerning the rigidity of phenomenology were appeased. Understanding this influence, we will be able to show



the manner in which substitution is the formal indication of the self's constitutive ethical horizon as disclosed by the previously made phenomenological descriptions and the manner in which substitution is the guiding indicator for future analyses, analyses which once again open up the question of the theological.

With the mention of Merleau-Ponty we are reminded of Levinas's obvious geographical situation in France, which would almost certainly bring him into contact with France's own gadfly of the late twentieth century, Jacques Derrida. Inasmuch as Husserl, Heidegger, and phenomenology are constantly referenced in Levinas's philosophy, Jacques Derrida, in contrast, is just as much *not* referenced. As is so appropriate for Derrida, Levinas keeps Derrida in the margins, but as marginal, Derrida frames a great extent of Levinas's thinking. Derrida has often been read as an amiable critic of Levinas, liking what has been attempted but finding fault with the specifics. Chapter one will set up the parameters of this possible critique. Chapter three, however, will not only attempt to undermine those who read Derrida as critic but will also show how he can be read as complementary of Levinas's program. Indeed, Derrida's own turn toward ethics out of his earlier discussions of language and difference are only possible in the wake of his reading of Levinas. Nevertheless, if Derrida were completely innocent as a writer, he would not be so noticeably absent in the margins. With all the focus on method and the concrete in chapter four, it will also be noted how Derrida's work is, in some sense, just as instigative of Levinas's new emphasis in his second work as any reconceived notion of transcendental phenomenology.

## CHAPTER TWO Phenomenological Groundwork

### Introduction

In Totality and Infinity, Levinas's first major philosophical work, he ends his preface with the explanation that the preface itself is a corrective "attempting to restate without ceremony what has already been ill understood."<sup>11</sup> As evidenced by the explicit note of indebtedness earlier in the preface, one of the misunderstandings that Levinas desires to correct is that he is not rooted in phenomenology, for as he claims about his book "the presentation and the development of the notions employed *owe everything* to the phenomenological method" (my italics).<sup>12</sup> We have here, then, a hint that Levinas and phenomenology are not the most obvious of allies. It may seem more appropriate that Levinas appears to back off this strong claim in his second major work, Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence, to one slightly less committed when he declares his work to be in the "*spirit* of Husserlian philosophy," but he immediately reaffirms his debt by stating that within this book phenomenology has been "restored to its rank of being a method for all philosophy."<sup>13</sup> If it is true that Levinas has the education in phenomenology, has published works on phenomenology, and claims that his works are inspired by phenomenology, then why should there be any question concerning Levinas and phenomenology? In short, if Levinas is already correcting misunderstandings about his philosophical roots before a book is even published, then there must be something

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<sup>11</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, Totality and Infinity, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1961), 30.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>13</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 183.

throwing his use of phenomenology into doubt. Take this excerpt from an interview with Levinas conducted by Philippe Nemo as reason enough, given that the “face” and the “other” discussed here are central themes throughout Levinas’s writings:

I do not know if one can speak of a “phenomenology” of the face, since phenomenology describes what appears. . . I think rather that access to the face is straightaway ethical. You turn yourself toward the other as toward an object when you see a nose, eyes, a forehead, a chin, and you can describe them. The best way of encountering the other is not even to notice the color of his eyes! . . . The relation with the face can surely be dominated by perception, but what is specifically the face is what cannot be reduced to that.<sup>14</sup>

Levinas is apparently admitting that he is doing phenomenology on that which one cannot do phenomenology. Adept readers of Levinas seem to accept his confession.

Simon Critchley, in his introduction to the Cambridge Companion to Levinas, agrees:

“Levinas’s big idea about the ethical relation to the other person is not phenomenological, because the other is not given as a matter for thought or reflection.”<sup>15</sup> If it is the case that phenomenology is simply a way of bettering the sciences by improving the way description is done, then Levinas and others are right about his assertion. For phenomenology to be philosophy, however, it must be more – do more.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 85 - 86.

<sup>15</sup> Simon Critchley, “Introduction,” in The Cambridge Companion to Levinas, eds. Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 8.

<sup>16</sup> The “more” which phenomenology must do concerns Levinas’s worry that the “face” can be dominated by perception, as though phenomenology was an analytical tool for carving up experience into its components and the phenomenologist was somehow apart, making the dissection from a point outside experience. Levinas challenges this as the purpose of phenomenology. What we will see by the third section of this chapter is Levinas uncovering horizons of experience that add to the sense of the *whole of experience* rather than components, a whole which, he claims, has been overlooked and forgotten.

When Merleau-Ponty asks the question, “What is Phenomenology?” he reminds us that phenomenology has yet to be totally embraced in one comprehensive form. We might first look to Husserl for an answer, but that would involve deciding whether to follow “Husserl I” (before 1913), “Husserl II” (1913 to around 1930), or “Husserl III” (after 1930). Perhaps, we might simply see Husserl as seminal to Heidegger who “corrects” and “reorients” phenomenology to its proper course as something existential and ontological. Neither possibility takes into account the various disciples of Husserl: Levinas, Fink, Derrida, to name a few, who claim to take phenomenology beyond being to something “otherwise,” “meontic,” or “*differant*.” Phenomenology surely started with Husserl but has grown beyond him. In truth, Husserl approached his own work with near “fear and trembling,” meaning that while his analysis of psychologism and western science appears sure, none of his published works act as proffering an alternative with which he was entirely satisfied. Phenomenology, then, seems destined to be *without themes and principles* to which *all* practitioners of phenomenology would adhere. If we take a moment to view Levinas’s early introduction to phenomenology, we will see that his moment of greatest exposure to the discipline also comes during the time of phenomenology’s great divergence as Husserl and Heidegger occupy influential positions at Freiburg, each holding to his own understanding of phenomenology.

### **Levinas’s Education in Historical Context**

Levinas’s journey towards a phenomenological education began in 1923 when he left Kovno, Lithuania, for the University of Strasbourg. Not only was Strasbourg the closest French university to Kovno, but France also represented a land of equality and opportunity, a welcome thought for Levinas who had long endured the anti-Semitic

sentiment of the Russian government.<sup>17</sup> Philosophy, however, was not Levinas's first choice. During his first year, he studied Latin and spent his private time studying French and German, pursuits that would later prove very beneficial. As Levinas entered his second year at Strasbourg, he had his first encounter with philosophy, and from this point on, philosophy would remain a central passion. Levinas recalls learning the essential teachings of Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, and Kant while in France - the pillars of any philosophical education - but he was also drawn to the contemporary thinkers en vogue at the time: Durkheim and Bergson.<sup>18</sup> Bergson, specifically, caught Levinas's attention for both his philosophy and the fact that he was born a Jew, assimilated into French culture, and made significant philosophical contributions. This kinship of a shared tradition also helped draw Levinas to the works of Edmund Husserl. While in Strasbourg, Gabrielle Peiffer, with whom Levinas would later co-translate the French version of Husserl's Cartesian Meditations, introduced Levinas to Husserl via Husserl's Logical Investigations. Levinas admits entering into this work with difficulty and without guidance, but after much perseverance in this phenomenological direction, he took the advice of his teacher, Jean Hering, and left Strasbourg to attend Freiburg and learn from the master himself.<sup>19</sup> The year was 1928.

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<sup>17</sup> Biographical information concerning Levinas is sparse, and no one work tells the complete story. This general background comes from Richard Cohen, "Emmanuel Levinas: Philosopher and Jew," in Elevations: The Height of the Good in Rosenzweig and Levinas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 115 ff.

<sup>18</sup> Levinas testifies to the significant influence of his early philosophy teaching as well as his year at Freiburg in Ethics and Infinity, 19 - 44.

<sup>19</sup> The only author I have found who mentions any relationship between Levinas and Jean Hering is John E. Drabinski in Sensibility and Singularity: The Problem of Phenomenology in Levinas (New York: SUNY Press, 2001), 2.

Levinas's arrival at Freiburg in 1928 was hardly the most anticipated arrival of the year. Earlier, in May of 1927, Husserl was contemplating the possibility of retirement as well as the logistics of naming Martin Heidegger as his successor.<sup>20</sup> With the publication of Heidegger's Being and Time, his subsequent promotion at Marburg and then, owing to Husserl's personal and enthusiastic recommendation, Heidegger was officially named to the faculty at Freiburg on February 7, 1928; his first class began in the winter semester of the same year. When Levinas entered Freiburg, hoping to hear phenomenology from its originator, he became immersed in perhaps the most important transition year for phenomenological thought. With only a general knowledge of the Logical Investigations and Ideas I, Levinas was not in the least familiar with Being and Time, the talk of Freiburg, but with the author's presence and proffered classes, Levinas became a quick study. As a result, Levinas became aware of two phenomenologies at odds.

Husserl was only beginning to see what a fundamental critique Heidegger offered. In April 1926, Heidegger honored his teacher's birthday with a gift of his yet unpublished Being and Time, which Husserl read that same month, finding the difficult piece alien to his own way of phenomenology. If this was Husserl's first sign that the ground between Heidegger and himself was no longer so common, the second sign would come in October, 1927, when the master invited his named successor to collaborate on an article

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<sup>20</sup> Biographical information concerning the interplay between Husserl and Heidegger stands in contrast to the meager offerings about Levinas. I have taken my information about this well known period in philosophy from three basic sources: Ronald Bruzina, Edmund Husserl and Eugen Fink: Beginnings and Ends in Phenomenology 1928-1938 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), chapters 1 and 3. Theodore Kisiel, "Husserl and Heidegger: Two Phenomenologies?" paper presented at the University of Kentucky, November 19, 1999. Donn Welton, The Other Husserl: The Horizons of Transcendental Phenomenology (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002).

that would define phenomenology for the Encyclopedia Britannica. The effort disturbed Husserl with the now palpable differences. Nevertheless, Husserl still welcomed his choice of successor, but Heidegger's new way of doing phenomenology was no longer a printed word or private conversation, it was taught in the very classrooms once dominated by Husserl. That Heidegger's classes often took the form of a critique of Husserlian phenomenology seemed common knowledge - common to everyone with the possible exception of Husserl himself. At this time, Husserl was so centered on his work that he failed to notice that Heidegger had undertaken a fundamental critique even within his offered courses that brought the very issue of phenomenology into question.

Heidegger's influence upon Levinas during the year Levinas spent at Freiburg is indubitable, for not only did Levinas read Being and Time, but he attended all of Heidegger's courses. Nevertheless, Levinas also heard phenomenology from Husserl himself. He attended Husserl's summer course in 1928 and the professor's last course on intersubjectivity in the winter semester of the same year. Unfortunately, for unspecified reasons, Husserl cancelled this course after a few weeks into the semester. Of course, one might speculate that Husserl's age, health, and personal ambitions for completing a definitive work that described his concept of phenomenology all played a part in his final withdrawal from teaching. Husserl's absence in the classroom did not hinder Levinas from approaching him as a mentor. Husserl's hiring of Levinas as a French tutor for his wife helped to make Levinas welcome in Husserl's home where he felt free to approach Husserl on all matters of phenomenology. At the end of the academic year, Levinas left Freiburg and went to Paris, France, where he completed his doctoral dissertation under Jean Wahl. His thesis, The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology, was

published in 1930.<sup>21</sup> He followed this up with translating the fourth and fifth meditations of Husserl's Cartesian Meditations into French; his classmate from Strasbourg, Gabrielle Peiffer, translated the first three.<sup>22</sup>

We might expect that Levinas was quite proficient in phenomenology considering the exposure Levinas had to Husserl's personal tutoring given his year at Freiburg when he could refine his understanding of Husserl's published works and his close work with phenomenological methodology with which he worked in his dissertation and translation of the Meditations. However, Husserl's rethinking of phenomenology achieved new fervor after the French translation of the Meditations appeared. It is well known that Husserl spent the years 1923-25 considering alternative ways, i.e. non-Cartesian ways, into the phenomenological reduction, but with the publication of the Cartesian Meditations in 1931, in France, many interpret this book as definitively grounding all of phenomenology in a Cartesian vein. Certainly, in 1929, Husserl remarked in a letter to Roman Ingarden that he considered this work to be "my main text."<sup>23</sup> However, considering the Meditations to be indicative of Husserl's work as a whole grossly underestimates the significance of Husserl choosing not to have his "main text" published in German. Levinas's principle dealings with Husserlian phenomenology, namely Ideas I and the Cartesian Meditations, sets his education firmly within the Cartesian way, but

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<sup>21</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, La théorie de l'intuition dans la phénoménologie de Husserl, Paris: Alcon, 1930. The Theory of Intuition in the Phenomenology of Husserl, trans. André Orianne (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1973).

<sup>22</sup> Edmund Husserl, Meditations Cartésiennes, trans. Gabrielle Peiffer and Emmanuel Levinas, reviewed by Alexandre Koyré (Paris: Armand Coline, 1931).

<sup>23</sup> Edmund Husserl, Letter to Ingarden, May 26, 1929, Briefwechsel, 3/3, 248.



Husserl's decision not to publish the Meditations in German suggests that he felt his Cartesianism, as represented in this text, was vulnerable and not appropriate for the German audience.<sup>24</sup> Of course, the main reason for why Germany would not be receptive once again falls to the widespread influence of Heidegger. Husserl's Cartesianism as expressed by the Meditations could not offer a refutation for the miscomprehension apparent to Husserl in Being and Time. In effect, Heideggerian phenomenology was increasing its hold upon Germany, and Husserl was, at the moment, defenseless.

In order to determine what Levinas is in fact doing when it comes to phenomenology, we are going to have to understand the basics of phenomenology in their initial formulation (yet with an awareness of the seeds of limitation within them); and for this we must begin with Edmund Husserl (Chapter One: Phenomenology 101). We then have to turn to Levinas's relationship to those figures who most shaped his phenomenological outlook: not only Husserl, but above all, Heidegger (Chapter One: Levinas and Heideggerian Phenomenology). Finally, we will follow Levinas's return to Husserl, as Levinas himself does time and again to show how he engages the basic truths of phenomenology (found in "Phenomenology 101") but also attempts to go beyond the limitations of phenomenology (Chapter One: Levinas and the "Spirit" of phenomenology).

### **Phenomenology 101: Basic Ideas of Edmund Husserl**

As I have already cautioned, looking at Husserl's work means determining which period one should emphasize for what is really phenomenological. The first period prior

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<sup>24</sup> In December of 1930, Husserl wrote Pfänder explaining, "In place of a German edition [of the Meditations] I am thinking in the next year of publishing a larger work that is appropriate for the German public." Letter to Pfänder, December 6, 1930, Briefwechsel, 3/2,177.

to 1913 and the release of Ideas I features the Logical Investigations which investigates logic and language without featuring the egoic Cartesian bent of his later publications. Jacques Taminiaux has shown that this period, most specifically the “Sixth Investigation,” was instrumental in Heidegger’s thought.<sup>25</sup> The period between 1913 and 1930 highlights the core of Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology. Most philosophers have taken this seminal period as central, focusing on Husserl’s influential introduction to phenomenology, Ideas I. Nevertheless, all the works of this period from Ideas I to the Cartesian Meditations and including even the Crisis-texts may simply compose an entry into phenomenology rather than a complete definition of it. Finally, the period after 1930 highlights the move from transcendental phenomenology to genetic phenomenology with a new emphasis on his concept of the life-world and a reemphasis on horizons.<sup>26</sup>

Husserl’s final period of work features manuscript notes and correspondence rather than publications; however, a noticeable shift occurs in the published Crisis-texts, which are suggestive of some of his new direction. As is the case with most manuscript

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<sup>25</sup> Jacques Taminiaux, “Heidegger and Husserl’s Logical Investigations: In Remembrance of Heidegger’s Last Seminar,” in Dialectic and Difference: Modern Thought and the Sense of Human Limits, eds. James Decker and Robert Crease (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1985). Taminiaux argues convincingly that even though Heidegger rarely and indifferently makes reference to Husserl’s Logical Investigations, Heidegger relies very heavily on this work. The one real admission to this comes in Heidegger’s work, “My Way in to Phenomenology,” where he claims, “When I myself began to practice phenomenological seeing, teaching-and-studying at Husserl’s side, experimenting at the same time with a new understanding of Aristotle in seminars, my interest began to be drawn again to the Logical Investigations, and especially to the sixth in the first edition.”

<sup>26</sup> The roots of this move come much earlier. From 1918 – 1926, Husserl’s lectures on Transcendental Logic are already seminal for the concept of a genetic phenomenology. These lectures have been collected in Analyses Concerning Passive and Active Synthesis: Lectures on Transcendental Logic, trans. Anthony J. Steinbock (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001).

material, Husserl does not follow an explicit or definitively written out methodology. It has, in fact, been effectively argued that if one wants to understand what Husserl was doing in his investigations during this period, one must turn to the work of Eugen Fink, Husserl's last assistant, who examined Husserl's manuscripts and *what* Husserl did in order to piece together a methodological *how*.<sup>27</sup> It is clear that Levinas was aware of Husserl's manuscripts as well as Fink's Sixth Cartesian Meditation - Fink's published effort to come to a conclusive synthesis of Husserl's work in phenomenology - but it is also clear that Levinas makes little substantial reference to either. This should not, however, deter us from linking Levinas's thinking with this final period. On the one hand, Fink endeavored to see Husserl's introductory material as broadened and deepened rather than superceded or excluded by Husserl's later thought.<sup>28</sup> Consequently, if Levinas's familiarity with Husserl and the published material really does comprehend the "spirit" of Husserl, then he, too, could move toward a deeper conception of phenomenology, methodologically speaking. Secondly, Fink's work to abstract from Husserl's manuscripts a comprehensive methodology takes into account the important work of Heidegger. Fink was able to communicate Heidegger's purpose to Husserl as

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<sup>27</sup> Ronald Bruzina introduces his translation of Fink's Sixth Cartesian Meditation with a historically and philosophically informed argument that establishes Fink as not only Husserl's last assistant but also a co-collaborator in phenomenology. With such a connection, it is important to read Fink's work on phenomenological methodology as indicative of the manner in which Husserl was doing phenomenology. See Ronald Bruzina, "Translator's Introduction," to Eugen Fink's Sixth Cartesian Meditation (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), vii – xcii.

<sup>28</sup> Ronald Bruzina, The End of Phenomenology – The Beginning of Philosophy (unpublished).

well as help him see the importance of it to phenomenology.<sup>29</sup> While Husserl certainly never embraces Heidegger's phenomenology, Levinas's own tutelage under Heidegger links him to a sense of the subject as transcendently constituted, a sense in contrast with Husserl's transcendently constituting subject of the phenomenological reduction. Finally, Levinas has a more direct connection to Fink through the very atmosphere of French philosophy at the time in the person of Merleau-Ponty who apparently drew from Husserl's final period after a trip to Louvain where he read Husserl's manuscripts and met with Fink.<sup>30</sup> Levinas read and knew Merleau-Ponty, although only as an acquaintance, and he also had occasion to hear him present papers. Therefore, even though Levinas's connection to this third period of Husserl is tenuous at best, we cannot rule out the possibility that Levinas's phenomenology underwent a broadening and deepening of its own.

Husserl did not find any of his creative periods to be definitive of phenomenology. His Cartesian Meditations were meant to showcase the sum of his offerings in phenomenology, but after further work, Husserl did not even publish them in German. After hopes of simply amending the Meditations had faded, Husserl planned a final cumulative effort which went unfinished. The last years of Husserl's life were complicated with illness and the infirmities of age, hampering his plans for a decisive treatise on his work which, ultimately, were ended by his death. What we find instead of a single conclusive opus in Husserl's works is a constant reworking of themes and

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<sup>29</sup> Ronald Bruzina, "Translator's Introduction," in Sixth Cartesian Meditation, 1 – lii.

<sup>30</sup> Merleau-ponty twice makes reference to Fink's as of then unpublished work in his introduction to The Phenomenology of Perception, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), vii and xx.

method, some of which last throughout his philosophy in one form or another while others that once took a prominent place fade into the background. Rather than focus on a single period, I will try to offer what I see as integrally important to the phenomenological agenda as a whole, those issues which survived Husserl's revisions as well as those that appeared important at the end after reworking his philosophy time and time again.

The simplicity of Husserl's phenomenology stems from his famous phrase, also employed but reappropriated by Heidegger, that we must return "to the things themselves," "*zu den Sachen selbst.*" The necessity of making such a return suggests that philosophy once considered things themselves but has done so inadequately or wrongly or through eyes that thought they saw things themselves but were in fact unfortunately cluttered with presuppositions that could not allow for a clear, distinct, or pure viewing. Husserl's impact, then, begins with the inauspicious plea to go look again, or in philosophical parlance, to study the appearing of a thing, which gives birth to phenomenology. With a claim to speak honestly, Husserl states his seminal idea in the following manner:

I can do no other than honestly say (assuming that I am not already confused through superficially acquired theories): I now see things, these things here, they themselves; I do not see images of them, nor mere signs. Obviously, I can also be deceived. But on what basis does it prove to be deception? On the basis of a reliable seeing, tested time and again, that is a seeing of real things themselves. To say that all seeing is a deception negates the sense of talking about deception.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Edmund Husserl, Manuscript, "Einleitung in die Philosophie," F I 29 (1922/23), 3a; transcription, 33. Translated by Donn Welton in The Other Husserl, 13. This quote is also important for the claim that what one sees is not mitigated by an image, which Husserl did claim in his early period. While wedded to the intermediary of an image, Husserl was caught in a dualistic dilemma wherein the realm of conscious reflection was always of images and the world of objects was never present without mediation.

So Husserl went and looked again, reflected upon his looking again, and guarded carefully against being confused by “superficially acquired theories” while looking and reflecting. The complexity that grew from this has ignited much of what continental philosophy is today. Let us turn for a few pages to a general introduction of phenomenology in order to see how so much has begun from simply returning to the things themselves.

Phenomenology is inspired first by the presence of things which present themselves in various ways. The initial task of phenomenological analysis is to disclose every manner of an object’s presentation - what makes that object appear the way it does. Phenomenology, in other words, attempts to be true to phenomena - to the way something looks.<sup>32</sup> Capturing the how and why a thing looks the way it does, however, begins an unexpected, complex methodology. First, an object does not have one look but many profiles as the same object is viewed from many different vantage points. A book, any book, (Tolstoy’s War and Peace, Drew Carey’s Dirty Jokes and Beer, the books I shamelessly plagiarize to write this dissertation) cannot be judged by their cover, for not

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Truthfully, Husserl’s early work often sounds quite Kantian with a dualism analogous to the phenomenal and noumenal realms.

<sup>32</sup> It is important to note that Husserl’s phenomenology is not simply a philosophy of vision or sense in general. Husserl’s fountainhead, the Logical Investigations, trans. J. N. Findlay, 2 vols. (New York: Humanities Press, 1970), did not discuss visible objects but speech, instead. Husserl also avoids discussion of the visual in his 1908 lectures on meaning (Vorlesungen über Bedeutungslehre: Sommersemester 1908, ed. Ursula Panzer, Husserliana, Vol. 26 (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989), see chapters 1 and 2) and in Formal and Transcendental Logic, trans. Dorion Cairns (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1969). Nevertheless, the vast majority of Husserl’s work emphasizes vision and sensation, and while we may not find this emphasis worthy of direct criticism, it certainly leaves open the possibility of a broader understanding of phenomenology. That phenomenology may be more than what Husserl envisioned, however, is something Husserl himself would hardly contest.

only can an observer notice a cover, but also the spine; the unadorned back; the smoothness, roughness, or shiny gold lined pages when the book is shut; the large, small, smudged print on open page 1, 2, 3, etc.; all of which make up the book's appearing but which never appear all at once. Not only would we describe these various profiles which one would term objective, but the full manifestness of an object also entails the judgements that the hard cover is beautiful, the unadorned pages are austere, the writing is insightful. Consequently, the phenomenological analysis not only describes how an object appears, but it also reveals that manifestness is the result of a relationship between perceiver and perceived - for both appearances of judgement and objectiveness are the result of this relationship. Any report a perceiver makes originates from a vantage point taken by the observer, whether one walks around the object or handles it, turning it this way and that.

Surely the claim that the description of an object's appearing must originate from a situated perceiver does not raise philosophical eyebrows, but if phenomenology is to truly return to the things themselves, to be true to their appearing, then phenomenological description must not "forget" the role of the perceiver in the analysis of the manner of an object's manifestness. The sum of our lived experience with objects, the intricate interplay of attending to what is present and our subsequent recognition of its "sense," comprises a subject's "natural attitude."<sup>33</sup> One does not take up this attitude; one simply

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<sup>33</sup> Husserl defines the "sense" (*Sinn*) of an object as that consistent, reidentifiable pattern that gives what is present a certain determinateness. *Sinn*, for Husserl, is broader in implication than *Bedeutung* (translated as "meaning" or "signification") since it is used to refer to the whole of the experiential field. *Ideas I*, 294.

exists precisely as situated in this manner by virtue of having experience.<sup>34</sup> Husserl describes our embeddedness in the natural world in this way: “The natural world . . . is there for me continuously as long as I go on living naturally. As long as this is the case I am ‘in the natural attitude.’”<sup>35</sup>

By renewed attention to the experience of one’s natural position, phenomenology includes in its analysis an often undervalued aspect of experiencing the presence of an object, the important role that absence and expectation play in appearing. While I look at the profile of a closed book lying flat on a table from a position directly above the front cover facing up, most of the book is absent from my view. The parts not present at this initial viewing today are co-given, anticipated from prior viewings of this very book or even from memory of repeatable qualities found in books in general in order to fill out the manifestness of the new viewing today. Husserl describes the bringing into present awareness of anticipated profiles as a pre-grasping. However, with the necessity of including the idea of a pre-grasping, has Husserl’s ground in experience already been compromised? How can it be as Husserl would have it that perception is a direct grasping of the object itself when so much of the object is absent at each look? Husserl, in fact, concedes that “in the content of the directly grasped in a given moment of

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<sup>34</sup> The realization that one exists as situated in the natural attitude is not self-evident to the natural attitude. The natural attitude is a realization from a transcendental perspective that can render the structure of the natural attitude evident. Nevertheless, that structure is not realized all at once, as though the transcendental perspective absolutely escapes the natural attitude to view the natural attitude from a position devoid of naïve notions. The rendering evident of the natural attitude from the transcendental perspective takes place in a continual process wherein naïve notions are ferreted out and bracketed off for a clearer description of the structure.

<sup>35</sup> Husserl, Ideas I, §28.



perception there lie moments of the pre-grasp. Basically, nothing in the perceived is purely and adequately perceived.”<sup>36</sup>

The inclusion of pre-grasp, objective profiles, and subject-object relationship in phenomenological description of lived experience were the start of a methodology that Husserl hoped would eventually result in a philosophy of description that should undergird and restart the thinking of the sciences. The difference between phenomenology and the sciences, which are themselves methods of classification, description, and interpretation, has already been anticipated in our discussion of the importance of the tie between perceiver and perceived. By emphasizing this relationship, the phenomenologist must avoid employing a language of objectification focused upon the item present but, rather, must employ a language of “reflection” wherein the *experience* of the object receives the emphasis. Reflecting upon experience as moments of grasp and pre-grasp together, profile upon profile, requires that the description recognize the perception of an object as the recuperating of the perceiving as a lived experience, i.e. as a perceiving through time. The process of describing the experience of an act of perceiving the world as it is present in a meaningful way discloses a *field that conditions the object’s appearing* and provides the act of perceiving with its meaningfulness. Husserl often calls the *process* of disclosing this otherwise unrecognized field that meaningfully conditions active perceiving the “phenomenological reduction.”<sup>37</sup> The reduction is the first step into a deeper methodology that will take

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<sup>36</sup> Edmund Husserl, Erste Philosophie II (1923/24), Part 2: Theorie der phänomenologischen Reduktion, ed. Rudolf Boehm, Husserliana, vol. 8 (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1959), 45.

<sup>37</sup> While it may be more correct to discuss the reduction within the framework of Husserl’s transcendental turn, Donn Welton records that Husserl considered that the

phenomenology past a simple description done within the still naively accepted natural attitude.

The phenomenological reduction takes on a more specific meaning when Husserl begins his transcendental phenomenology. In a passage from First Philosophy, Husserl explains the beginning of the transcendental move with respect to cognizing consciousness:

One must study cognizing life itself in its own essential achievements . . . and observe how consciousness in itself and according to its essential type constitutes and bears in itself objective sense and how it constitutes in itself “true” sense, in order then to find in itself the thus constituted sense as existing “in itself,” as true being and truth “in itself.”<sup>38</sup>

In order to disclose the fields that meaningfully condition consciousness and present the phenomena of objects in the manner of their presentation, Husserl’s transcendental philosophy begins its methodology within cognizing consciousness itself. The division between the immanent field of the self’s own conscious awareness and the field of objects of which one is conscious yet which remains transcendent to the self by virtue of the real existence of objects in themselves undergoes the phenomenological reduction as it is transcendently understood to the effect that the relationship between the perceiver and perceived under the reduction *allows for the study of the immanent field of*

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phenomenological reduction applied even to the Logical Investigations, a pre-transcendental text. Welton, The Other Husserl, 412, n.32. Husserl’s lectures of 1925 even discuss the reduction in conjunction with phenomenological psychology, which takes place within the “natural attitude.” Edmund Husserl, Phenomenological Psychology: Lectures, Summer Semester 1925, ed. Walter Biemel, Husserliana, vol. 9 (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1968), 34, 144.

<sup>38</sup> Edmund Husserl, “Kant and the Idea of Transcendental Philosophy,” Southwestern Journal of Philosophy 5 (Fall 1974), 24. This essay first appeared as part of Husserl’s Erste Philosophie I (1923/24), ed. Rudolf Boehm, Husserliana, vol. 7 (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1956), 248. A small modification in translation has been made. “Essential achievements” replaces “achievements of essence.”

*consciousness to provide for objective sense.* In other words, by perceiving the things themselves within the life of consciousness, one may reflect upon the manner in which objects are meaningfully constituted within cognitive awareness in order to reveal how the “‘true’ sense” within consciousness discloses the sense of an object “in itself.” What the reduction actually implies, then, is not a simple reducing of transcendent life to an immanent and ultimately solipsistic field of consciousness but a reduction that demands its findings to be reintroduced back into the realm of transcendence in an action of world affirmation.

The phenomenological reduction’s turning to immanent consciousness is not so simply done as turning to one’s experiences and memories of experience. Certain presuppositions, especially the expectation of existence, under gird every aspect of the natural attitude, from the experience of objects to the very world itself. The ontological expectation of the world as there has resulted in the many disciplines that describe the world as an objective totality. In order to grasp the world phenomenologically, the world must be understood as a field or horizon that encompasses both subject and object, as a field outside of which the subject cannot take up a vantage point. Consequently, the ontological expectation of the world as existing in an autonomous manner, a state in which the qualities of the world that are only meaningful in conscious experience are assumed to be independent of consciousness, must be put “out of play.” Immanent reflection of cognizing consciousness alone, in a kind of supposed introspection, cannot effect such a “bracketing off”: “however carefully it (immanent reflection) may observe and analyze, however truly it may be directed toward my pure psychical life, toward the

pure inwardness of my soul, bare reflection remains natural, psychological reflection.”<sup>39</sup>

The phenomenological reduction, the process which uses immanent reflection for the disclosing of the inclusive world horizon, must first begin with a suspension of naïve, especially naturalistic, belief in existence, which puts the natural attitude “out of play.” Husserl dubs this movement of exclusion the *epochè*.<sup>40</sup>

The exclusion enacted by the *epoché* is matched by a movement of inclusion in immanent reflection, which has gained the ability to surpass the natural viewing of the world as a totality of objects and that the subject is a self-enclosed region of self-cognition. The phenomenologist now understands that cognition, consciousness of experience, and intuited objects are not divided as a realm of immanence versus a realm of transcendence, but, rather, immanent reflection now provides the action that discloses immanence and transcendence as cohering within the unity of the integrative sense of something. Husserl makes the claim as follows: “The world itself has its entire being as a certain ‘sense.’”<sup>41</sup> Donn Welton clarifies that one’s “putting out of play that condition necessary for both the subject and the world to appear as ‘objects,’ as beings, gives us access to them in their being.”<sup>42</sup> In other words, for an admittedly difficult concept,

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<sup>39</sup> Husserl, Erste Philosophie II, 79.

<sup>40</sup> Husserl, Ideas I, §32.

<sup>41</sup> Husserl, Ideas I, §55.

<sup>42</sup> Welton, The Other Husserl, 89.

instead of looking at the objects that are there, the phenomenological reduction reveals that field that makes the “there” there.<sup>43</sup>

Husserl describes the disclosed field that provides the conditions for the possibility of cognition in terms of certain structures. Our daily lived experience must be described in terms that capture the quality of experience, which is clarified and stripped of its mundane, naive attitude in phenomenology by uncovering the structure of phenomena, each differentiation of which has been hinted at in our discussion thus far. The first structure of experience is that which Husserl and Heidegger call the *sense* of an object. Sense is the characteristic of phenomena grounded in an object, all objects being determinate in the sense that they appear *as* something. The *as* structure of appearing, however, does not give a meaningful object; it is that structure that allows for that

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<sup>43</sup> At this time, I must make some necessary remarks concerning the method of using immanent reflection, especially concerning Husserl’s reduction to the transcendental ego. This issue is difficult to place in “Phenomenology 101” for Husserl never abandons an “I” centered entry into the phenomenological disclosure of the field that makes the “there” there, but at the same time, certain issues appear to problematize the usage of this entry into phenomenology, and Husserl spends some time working out alternate entry levels. The Idea of Phenomenology and Ideas I seem to place existence out of play in order to place the realm of transcendence within the immanent life of the subject. Donn Welton argues in The Other Husserl, that “Husserl’s Cartesian treatment of subjectivity as a ‘remainder’ . . . requires this interpretation,” 92. The lurking difficulty with this is that the subject appears as presumably existing even after existence was “bracketed” off. Consequently, immanent reflection within an existing subject would fall prey to the very objectifications Husserl wishes to avoid. While this is certainly problematic, and will appear again as one of Levinas’s own criticisms of Husserl, Husserl arguably intended for the subject to also fall under the *epochè*. Demonstrating Husserl’s own insight into the development of his phenomenological program, he makes similar criticisms of his Cartesianism in the Crisis texts. Edmund Husserl, The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy, trans. David Carr (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), § 43.

object's appearing - what Husserl terms the "what" of an object.<sup>44</sup> The object's appearing *as* something to a perceiver is prior to any and all interpretation. In order to discuss the significance of an object, Husserl unfolds the next structure of appearing which is the *for* structure wherein an object appears *for* a perceiver. As we have seen, phenomenology takes the tie between subject and object to be necessary for appearing; thus the *as* and *for* structure of phenomena exhibit the same necessary bond. In order for the sense of an object to be as something, it must appear for someone. It is not the case, however, that we have two separate structures but, rather, two distinguishable aspects to the structure of appearing.

The intricacies to the structure of appearing are not exhausted in the relation of the *as* and *for* structure. Not only does appearing take place as a result of the interrelation between the subject and the object, but the subject and object relationship occurs within a contextual field - what Husserl calls a horizon. The horizon that accompanies an appearing object is not itself a phenomenon, but that which makes possible the object's appearing in the *manner that it does*. A common mistake is to speak of an object's properties, hoping to get at "what" it is, as though one could divorce the object from its surroundings, as though the experience of the object had occurred, metaphorically speaking, in a vacuum. What appears comes to light in a context, embedded in its surroundings in such a way that the horizon of the object is, on the one hand, the ground of that object, meaning that from its context that which appears acquires its specificity and possibly its generation. The horizon, on the other hand, also serves as the dimension

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<sup>44</sup> Husserl, Ideas I, §130. Heidegger retains this same distinction, but he refers to the "what" as a property drawn from the object as present at hand. Martin Heidegger, Being and Time, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 192f, 200.

of possible appearing that becomes clear as the multiple perspectives of an object are unified in an observer's lived experience. We can term this horizontal structure as the *in* structure of appearing for it is necessary that all experience occur within the framework of the horizon.

The horizon as represented by the *in* structure of appearing, even though it is not itself representable as a phenomenon, is still disclosable insofar as one's focus object can shift to other objects that make up the surroundings. Husserl does, however, refer to a horizontal structure that is at once not representable as phenomenon but also remains hidden from disclosure in the manner in which an object can be disclosed. To this point, the possibility of appearing occurs with the fulfillment of a "what" that manifests itself *as* something *for* a perceiver *in* a contextual field. Each of these three elements to appearing is disclosable by the phenomenological attitude that reflects upon our consciousness of the world after one has enacted the phenomenological reduction, but the hidden structure *from* which the *in* structure receives its possibility of being is not disclosable by direct reflection. The problem is that as the eminent horizon of an object is possible *from* its transcendental conditions we are always already under these conditions and cannot gain a vantage point outside them in order to render them in an objective fashion.

The issue of the *from* structure of appearing is the issue of ultimates, of those structures that provide the possibility of the totality of appearing. At this point we enter the stage where Husserl and Fink were in a close working relationship.<sup>45</sup> Husserl abandoned the revising of the Meditations, leaving the process solely in the hands of

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<sup>45</sup> For the extended story that depicts the interweaving of thoughts between teacher and student, see Ronald Bruzina's first chapter, "Contextual Narrative: The Freiburg Phenomenology Workshop, 1925-1938," in Edmund Husserl & Eugen Fink.

Fink. Fink's subsequent work lead him to question some of those aspects of phenomenology that had been intricately and almost inextricably involved in Husserl's corpus - namely the Cartesian, egoic nature of the phenomenological reduction. It is important to note that Fink's work was done under close supervision by Husserl and that Fink's notes record Husserl's answers to questions that Fink raised. Consequently, we do not have a reworking of phenomenology peculiar to Fink, but one that expresses much of Husserl's thinking without Husserl having written those thoughts himself. The ego centered reduction is just such a case. Husserl's work continually reaffirms this method of entry into phenomenology, but by the time of the Cartesian Meditations and the Crisis-texts, he offers other possible points of entry as well as making the claim at one point in the Crisis that the transcendental egoic subject has "nothing human" about it.<sup>46</sup> Because the *topos* from which the reduction performs its reflective descriptions is characterized by Husserl as egoic, as though it were a privileged position of the subject pole in the subject object relationship, a question arises when considering those structures which seem to also include the subject within their respective frameworks. Fink asks Husserl about this problem with respect to transcendently constituting time-consciousness: "Does the pure stream of lived experience have a beginning, an end? Does 'worldly' talk of death and birth coincide with the problem of the beginning and end of transcendental time-consciousness?"<sup>47</sup> If Husserl holds to the *topos* of the egoic reduction as equivalent to a special function of the subject, then he would have to answer Fink in the affirmative, consequently revealing an affinity with Kant. Husserl, however, begins his answer with:

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<sup>46</sup> Bruzina, The End of Phenomenology, 14 n. 16.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.



“Self-constituting temporality cannot begin and cannot end,” which immediately distances the subject’s lived life from birth to death from having any transcendental power over temporality. He goes on to strengthen the implication of such a rift by redirecting the question: “What you have to ask is, Is the stream of egological lived experience as such to be considered wholly independently from transcendental intersubjectivity, must not the basic ‘genetic’ aporias be investigated in connection with the *all encompassing structures of totality*.”<sup>48</sup> Husserl’s redirection affirms for Fink that the *from* structure of appearing, those structures of totality, the ultimates, the absolute must be considered together with, but distinct from, the ego of the transcendental mode of the phenomenological reduction.

### **Levinas and Heideggerian Phenomenology**

Levinas has always considered his philosophy to be allied with phenomenology as its most basic methodology, and in particular, Levinas places himself squarely in the tradition left by Edmund Husserl. Of his time spent in Freiburg, Levinas claims, “it was little by little that the essential truth of Husserl, which I still believe today, emerged into my mind.”<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, what a philosopher cares to claim about his philosophy does not, necessarily, make it so. In the case of Levinas and his phenomenological allegiances, the case against his Husserlianism begins with the remainder of our quote just above, for even though Levinas still believes in the central truths of Husserl, he also asserts that “I do not at all obey his school’s precepts.”<sup>50</sup> Could it be that Levinas never

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<sup>48</sup> Bruzina, *The End of Phenomenology*, 15.

<sup>49</sup> Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 30.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

clearly assimilated what Husserl had to say? Let us turn to Husserl's own reading of Levinas's doctoral thesis, The Theory of Intuition in the Phenomenology of Husserl.<sup>51</sup> In a letter to Welch, after lamenting those who have misunderstood his phenomenology, a list including Scheler, Heidegger, and Hering-Strassburg, Husserl mentions Levinas's recent publication and complains that it "brings my phenomenology [down] to the same level as the Heideggerian and, thereby, robs it of its authentic sense."<sup>52</sup>

Heidegger's influence upon Levinas is undeniable. Levinas's dissertation, while written strictly on Husserl, makes several references to Heidegger, but in order to validate Husserl's claim that Levinas's work presents an inauthentic phenomenology, we must first briefly investigate what Husserl finds so unpalatable in his chosen successor. After the publication of Husserl's Formal and Transcendental Logic in June of 1927, Husserl dedicated the next two months to reading Being and Time. The conclusions he draws concerning Heidegger's philosophy are clearly written in the margins of his own copy of Being and Time. Husserl remarks, "In my sense, that is the way to an intentional psychology of personality in the broadest sense, moving out from personal life in the world . . ." This follows more critical commentary three pages prior, "Heidegger transposes or transvests the constitutive, phenomenological clarification of all regions of beings and universals, of the total region, world, into the anthropological. The entire

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<sup>51</sup> While we will make The Theory of Intuition one of our primary texts for review in this section, there is some concern as to whether Levinas's dissertation is relevant for his philosophy. When Sean Hand, the editor of The Levinas Reader (Oxford: Blackwell Press, 1989), asked Levinas if he could include a selection from the dissertation, Levinas assented with the caveat that Hand also include Levinas's declaration that this work was "ancient history" p. 11. Levinas, certainly, does evolve in his understanding of phenomenology, but I have remarked throughout this section that the chief criticism of Husserl which appears in The Theory of Intuition holds for all of Levinas's philosophy.

<sup>52</sup> Edmund Husserl, Letter to Welch, June 17 and 21, 1933, Briefwechsel, 3/6, 458.

problematic is a transference; Dasein corresponds to the ego, etc. Thereby everything becomes profoundly unclear and philosophically it loses its value.”<sup>53</sup> Husserl, without specifically mentioning Heidegger but with Heidegger as his clear target, concludes in the “Epilogue” to Ideas II (reprinted 1931) that Heideggerian phenomenology is neither radical nor scientific, completely misunderstanding the nature of the phenomenological reduction and falling prey to the very aporias of psychologism with which Husserl intended his method to do away.

The phenomenological reduction, the move from the natural attitude of empirical consciousness to transcendental consciousness, was Husserl’s answer to the problems of psychologism. Husserl criticizes empirical psychology for not recognizing the following: 1. Consciousness is always intentional, meaning that it is always “conscious of” an object in the object’s transcendence and ideality, and 2. Intentional consciousness, in itself, would be purified of any empirical apperception as a psychophysical fact.<sup>54</sup> Transcendental phenomenology, then, makes the relationship between intending acts of consciousness and the object at which it aims the focus of investigation simultaneously dispossessing objects of their independence from consciousness while ensuring their

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<sup>53</sup> Edmund Husserl, Psychological and Transcendental Phenomenology and the Confrontation with Heidegger (1927 – 1931), trans. and ed. Thomas Sheehan and Richard Palmer, Husserliana, vol. 6 (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1997).

<sup>54</sup> Here I am following Rudolf Bernet’s discussion of Husserlian consciousness, which he wants to distinguish from the popular late nineteenth century understanding that follows either empirical psychology or the transcendental in a Neo-Kantian sense. Rudolf Bernet, “Levinas’s Critique of Husserl,” in The Cambridge Companion to Levinas, eds. Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 82 – 84.

transcendence.<sup>55</sup> If Husserl understands Heideggerian phenomenology as a psychologism that places the world as both collection of beings and horizon of all being within the grasp of an un-reduced ego, then his criticism is, explicitly, that Heidegger cannot disclose anything beyond a human way of analysis, a way that imports unsubstantiated presuppositions. For Husserl to claim that Levinas reduces phenomenology to the Heideggerian means that Levinas also fails to properly understand the method of the reduction and the manner in which the reduction safeguards the transcendence of intentional objects.

Heidegger, however, would not characterize *Dasein* simply as the ego or his way into phenomenology as anthropology. The complaint held by Husserl concerning the impropriety of Heidegger's starting point seems to be a mutual complaint held by Heidegger against Husserl, and Levinas will have paid particular attention to these in his reading of Being and Time and his attending of Heidegger's lectures. For Heidegger, Husserl's transcendental ego represents a position that one takes up in order to do phenomenology, but it is a position which phenomenology cannot allow in the first place. Heidegger claims in his 1920 – 21 lectures, The Phenomenology of Religious Life, that "the point of departure of the path of philosophy is the *factual life experience*."<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Transcendence, in this section, will primarily mean the transcendence of an object as apart from a subject. The nature of intentional consciousness, as we shall see will allow us to argue that we can consider the transcendent object to be accessible within immanent reflection, what we mean when we say that the object is dispossessed of its independence from consciousness. Within immanent reflection, the perceived object as it is perceived (noema) is perceived in a multiplicity of views, but this multiplicity is found to have a constant, singular identity. This singular "X" of identity is also considered as "transcendent" by Husserl, but this will not be the main use of "transcendent" here.

<sup>56</sup> Martin Heidegger, The Phenomenology of Religious Life, trans. Matthias Fritsch and Jennifer Anna Gossetti-Ferenci (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 8.

Factual life is the entirety of experience, both the active and passive attitude of the human being. What is experienced, Heidegger explains, is designated as “world,” the milieu in which one lives. The relation, the manner, or the “how” one experiences the “world” is not, however, a part of the factual life experience. Phenomenology is that process of disclosing the manner of living in the “world,” and that manner with which all factual life addresses the world is, according to Heidegger, through significance: “All of my factual life situations are experienced in the manner of significance which determines the content of experience itself. This becomes clear if I ask myself how I experience *myself* in factual life experience.”<sup>57</sup> Onto this last sentence, Heidegger parenthetically adds, “no theories!” as if to suggest that any phenomenology that does not begin by simply addressing where one is must be relying upon a theory at its beginning, a postulated starting point. Without naming Husserl, Heidegger makes his critique of theory more explicitly contra Husserl’s phenomenological reflection: “This self-experience is no theoretical ‘reflection,’ no ‘inner perception,’ *or the like*, but is self-worldly experience.”<sup>58</sup>

At this point, let us not become too embroiled in the discussion concerning who has the purest reading of phenomenology’s philosophical foundations, whether we consider Husserl, Heidegger or Levinas. For now, it is sufficient to uncover Levinas’s

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While Levinas would not have attended this early lecture, I cite this portion here because it would be exemplary of the kinds of things Levinas would have heard in his lectures or talks with Heidegger. This particular quote and those following come from the “Methodological Introduction: Philosophy, Factual Life Experience, and the Phenomenology of Religion.” Here, Heidegger shows the fullness of his conceptions that will serve as his critique of Husserl at a very early stage.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 10.

understanding of phenomenology. Along the way, I shall make some comments to ensure that a proper reading of Husserlian phenomenology is not lost. The implication is that while Levinas is a careful reader of Husserl, he is not a perfect reader. Nevertheless, we shall conclude with a look at Levinas's mature understanding, which, I argue, does indeed hold on to the "spirit" of phenomenology.

One can imagine Husserl's dismay at his first reading of Levinas's Theory of Intuition, which was copywritten in 1930, a time well after Husserl's awakening to Heidegger's critique. Levinas boldly states in his introduction concerning his thesis that "we shall not fear to take into account problems raised by other philosophers, by students of Husserl, and, in particular, by Martin Heidegger, whose influence on this book will often be felt."<sup>59</sup> Levinas, however, goes beyond a simple rehashing of the phenomenological debate to make the stunning suggestion that Husserl's phenomenology, once understood aright, moves beyond its epistemological premises to the properly ontological: "We may discover that in the guise of epistemology Husserl pursues interests that are essentially ontological."<sup>60</sup> Indeed, given Levinas's tutelage under Heidegger, when Levinas makes the link between Husserl and ontology, he seems to mean ontology in a Heideggerian sense.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Levinas, The Theory of Intuition, lx.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>61</sup> Levinas even makes the claim, "such a powerful and original philosophy as Heidegger's . . . is to some extent only the continuation of Husserlian phenomenology." Theory of Intuition, 15. Several writers have taken this statement to mean that Levinas sees Husserl as a proto-Heideggerian and that the primary value of Husserl's transcendental phenomenology was to prepare the way for Heidegger's ontological phenomenology, e.g. Robert Manning, Interpreting Otherwise than Heidegger (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1993). The question we shall have to answer in

Levinas's two main criticisms of Husserl as they appear in his dissertation are as follows: 1. While Husserl describes consciousness as intentional, as open to all modes of phenomena, he begins with theoretical consciousness as primary and necessary and without being argued for before any other mode of experience can be properly understood, and 2. Because Husserl relies upon theoretical starting points, the phenomenological reduction never escapes the naïve attitude. Both of Levinas's points were first broached by Heidegger whose answer to the problem was an ontological analysis of *Dasein* from the starting point of factual life, which Husserl deemed anthropology. Levinas approaches the first criticism starting with his description of "The Phenomenological Theory of Being," the primary title to chapters two and three of his dissertation, where phenomenology's ontological program is revealed, finally arriving at chapter four and a discussion of the theory presumed in Husserl's phenomenology. The second criticism, which asks how the phenomenological reduction is to be accomplished, appears throughout the last half of the dissertation but never in a lengthy discussion. In fact, Levinas's only suggestion for a solution to this dilemma comes with some brief references to Heidegger's philosophy. Let us examine how Levinas develops these Heideggerian criticisms in his Theory of Intuition.

Levinas's interpretation of Husserl's phenomenology views the reduction as the moment of opening into an ontological philosophy. I have argued that Husserl's reduction recognized that the being of the world is experienced by consciousness as a certain "sense," and the goal of the reduction was to uncover the epistemological framework that provided the conditions of the manifest "sense." Levinas's early

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part 3 of chapter one is "does Levinas's statement claim Heidegger's superior position to Husserl or does it mean that what is admirable in Heidegger is his Husserlianism."

understanding, however, claims that the reduction allows one to move from experience and sense to the properly ontological, a move which can only be possible given consciousness as absolute.

The analysis of immanent perception,” he argues, “leads us to the absolute position of consciousness, to the impossibility of denying its existence. ‘When reflective perception is directed toward my *Erlebnis*, what is perceived is an absolute *self* (*absolute Selbst*), the existence of which cannot in principle be denied; that is, it is in principle impossible to suppose that it does not exist. To say of an *Erlebnis* given in such a way that it does not exist would be nonsense.’ We seem to be in the presence of the Cartesian *cogito*; there is no doubt about the relationship between the two ideas, and Husserl realizes it.”<sup>62</sup>

Levinas explains that Husserl does not delve deeply into what it means for consciousness to be absolute, only that Husserl asserts that it is; however, Levinas attempts to make the argument given what little Husserl does discuss. What makes Husserl’s absolute consciousness different from and a step beyond Descartes’ is his sensitivity to multiple possible meanings of the term existence. One of Descartes’ mistakes was defining the existence of consciousness in the same manner as the existence of objects, but consciousness, while it can become an object of itself, does not always exist in the manner of objects. Levinas explains, “The specific mode of existence of consciousness – its absoluteness and its independence from reflection – consists in its existing for itself, prior to being taken in any way as an object by reflection. Consciousness exists in such a way that it is constantly present to itself.”<sup>63</sup> As always present to itself, what appears in immanent reflection is always adequate to immanent perception, meaning there is no

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<sup>62</sup> Levinas, *The Theory of Intuition*, 28. Here Levinas discusses what it means for consciousness to be absolute, quoting Husserl’s *Ideas*, § 46. It is also helpful to read André Orianne’s “Translator’s Foreword,” in *The Theory of Intuition*, xxxv ff.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.



distinction between what is and what appears in the realm of consciousness, meaning one can properly determine the *essence* of an object as it appears in conscious reflection. By taking into account both the absolute existence of consciousness along with the adequate perception of *essence* within consciousness, Levinas sums up Husserl's ontological leap forward as follows:

Husserl's step forward beyond Descartes consists in not separating the knowledge of an object – or, more generally, the mode of appearing of an object in our life – from its being; it consists of seeing the mode of its being known as the expression and the characteristic of its mode of being. This is why, in Husserl's philosophy, there is for the first time a possibility of passing from and through the theory of knowledge to the theory of being.<sup>64</sup>

The discovery of the absoluteness of consciousness via the constant possibility of consciousness being able to reflect upon itself relies entirely upon a theoretical argument, which relates to Levinas's first criticism. Having argued that the absoluteness of consciousness is only discoverable in immanent reflection, Levinas criticizes this argument for its theoretical dependency, for reflection is a theoretical act. Once again, we hear Heidegger's admonition against beginning with any kind of "inner reflection." The failed result for phenomenology is that consciousness's absolute existence is theoretically presumed when its absolute nature demands that it be argued for and explicated as itself foundational and ground.<sup>65</sup> Levinas's critique of Husserl's preference

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<sup>64</sup> Levinas, The Theory of Intuition, 32.

<sup>65</sup> In reply to Levinas's criticism, allow me to say that because one *begins* with a theoretical act aimed at explaining the absolute nature of consciousness does not mean that Husserl has theoretically presupposed theory as primary or consciousness as absolute. For Husserl, this is a beginning, and all beginnings must be re-evaluated time after time as the nature of consciousness becomes evident until even the presupposed theory in the beginning finds its ground in the absolute nature of consciousness. Such a move would not be unlike Descartes claiming to build an epistemological structure from the truth of the *cogito* which provides the foundation for knowing the truth of God and

for theory – “no theories!” – will deepen with his discussion of intentionality as the subjective mode of consciousness.

Having argued for and critiqued Husserl’s absolute ground of consciousness, Levinas turns his explication of phenomenology to the mode in which consciousness operates: intentionality. “Intentionality is, for Husserl, a genuine act of transcendence and the very prototype of any transcendence.”<sup>66</sup> Levinas uses this as a working definition and means that intentionality is that which allows consciousness to reach an actual object that is not reliant upon consciousness for its existence, consequently distinguishing Husserl from Berkeleian idealism. Whereas Berkeley does not distinguish between sense-data and the qualities of objects, Husserl draws a sharp line. We are not, however, left with a dualism between what is sensed in consciousness and what exists as the inherent properties of an object.<sup>67</sup> Intentionality is the very openness of consciousness, a revisiting and deepening of the scholastic idea that consciousness is always consciousness of something. The pertinent question surrounding intentionality’s openness is: How does intentionality relate the subject to a transcendent object?

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later affirming that God must be the foundation for even the *cogito*. If it were the case that Husserl never revisited his starting points, then Levinas’s criticism would hold fast, but Husserl is a born beginner, starting over and evaluating his starting points throughout his philosophical career.

<sup>66</sup> Levinas, The Theory of Intuition, 40.

<sup>67</sup> Without careful explication it would be easy to argue that Husserl’s phenomenology from Ideas I does draw a sharp ontological line between consciousness and objects; however, Husserl’s concept of intentionality clearly creates a field that includes the transcendent within the immanence of consciousness. Husserl’s Cartesian methodology for investigating this field, on the other hand, reconstitutes this division.

Reaffirming that consciousness always has an object is hardly a philosophical innovation; nevertheless, once Husserl takes this concept and classifies it as intentionality, he wrests intentionality and, subsequently, consciousness from empirical, substantialist, or naturalistic interpretations.<sup>68</sup> The issue is whether or not intentional relation should be viewed as a property of consciousness, one activity among others, or as the very manner of existence for consciousness. Levinas understands the importance of the question and explicates Husserl as follows:

Intentionality is not the way in which a subject tries to make contact with an object that exists beside it. *Intentionality is what makes up the very subjectivity of subjects.* The very reality of subjects consists in their transcending themselves. The problem of the relation between subject and object was justified by a substantialist ontology which conceived existence on the model of things resting in themselves. Then, any relation to something alien was extremely mysterious.<sup>69</sup>

Levinas concludes, and rightly so, that Husserl wants to establish intentionality as the mode of conscious existence such that the conscious subject is always, already in relation to transcendent objects. This means, however, that the appellation of subject is already derivative, for it expects a separated object as its counterpart, but intentionality's relational modality means that both "subject" and "object" are derived from a singular

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<sup>68</sup> We shall note several times that Husserl rewords, reworks, or completely reconstructs pieces of his philosophy time and again. The importance of intentionality is central, as has already been discussed, but Husserl did not easily free intentionality from the classic empirical tradition. Levinas recounts the maturation of Husserl's philosophy between the writing of the Logical Investigations and Ideas I as a movement away from classic empirical oppositions. Husserl's Investigations describes the analysis of intentional consciousness in terms of "hyletic data" (*Empfindungen* – sensations), acts, and intentions. The correlates of the data, acts, and intentions are objects of the world that sit in opposition to consciousness. Ideas, as we shall see, brings more consistency to Husserl's account of intentionality by eliminating the opposition, if not the distinction, between consciousness and its objects.

<sup>69</sup> Levinas, Theory of Intuition, 41.

unified field, the field of consciousness.<sup>70</sup> Those intentional relations that characterize the field of consciousness include theoretical acts, which are the correlation between a world of things and sense acts, and practical acts, which are the correlation between objects and their usefulness or value. These intentional acts encompass the whole of lived experience, and phenomenology proposes the necessity that all must be investigated to determine the constitution of the world as experienced.

Levinas's criticism of Husserl specifically turns on his understanding of the theoretical acts of intentionality, a criticism with which we are already familiar because it follows Levinas's critique of the absoluteness of consciousness and the theoretical dependency beneath that argument, for in Levinas's view, Husserl's phenomenological program, from its inception, grounds all intentional acts in the theoretical. If Husserl's notion of intentionality does rely upon the theoretical to ground all other intentions, then phenomenology, in Husserl's formulation, begins with a presupposition, the very kind of prejudice phenomenology attempts to avoid. The root of this criticism arises from Levinas's reading of the Logical Investigations and Husserl's coming to grips with Brentano's assertion that "acts are either representations or founded upon representations."<sup>71</sup> Here, representation does not mean the re-presentation of an object to

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<sup>70</sup> Within intentional consciousness, Husserl distinguishes between the subjective apprehensions, *noeses*, and the correlates of those, *noemata*, which relate to the object of consciousness as correlate: Husserl, Ideas I, § 85, 88. This relation within consciousness allows for the possibility of expressing the *as* and *for* structure. Levinas's criticism of Husserl will undermine the claim that subject and object are derivative, for Levinas will accuse Husserl of preferring the noetic over the noema and the role of the subject over the role of the object.

<sup>71</sup> Edmund Husserl, Logical Investigations, 556. Levinas discusses this quote in Theory of Intuition, 57. While Levinas would contend that his understanding of phenomenology grew after his dissertation, he retained his critique, even grounding his critique in

consciousness but representation as an act of consciousness, which, for Husserl, would focus upon the constitution of the “matter,” “sense,” or “noema” of consciousness insofar as each of these refers to the “what” consciousness grasps or the *as* structure of consciousness. However, the *as* structure which stands as the characterization of the constitution of the object of consciousness must be teased out from the distinguishable *as/for* structures of appearing, arriving at a description of the object in its pre-theoretical presentation as a “what” as opposed to the “how” of its appearing *for* someone after the interpretive process occurs. Admittedly, such laying out of the pre-theoretical without interpretation is a theoretical modification of the original experience that presents itself in the *as/for* manner. The *as* structure realizes what Levinas finds to be the realist underpinnings of Husserl’s Logical Investigations where the “objectifying acts reach a being which exists independently of consciousness, and that the function of non-objectifying acts is to relate to these objects without contributing anything to their real constitution.”<sup>72</sup> Consequently, Levinas finds, in Husserl, objectifying/theoretical acts to

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Brentano’s statement, throughout. In 1983, explicating his own work, Levinas remarks about Husserl’s phenomenology, “the intentional structure of consciousness is . . . characterized by representation. It would be at the base of all theoretical and non-theoretical consciousness. This thesis of Brentano keeps its validity for Husserl in spite of all the precautions the latter brought and all the precautions with which he surrounded it in the notion of objectivizing acts.” Emmanuel Levinas, “La Conscience Non-Intentionnelle,” in Philosophes Critiques d’eux-memes, vol. 10 (New York: Peter Lang, 1983), 15. My translation.

<sup>72</sup> Levinas, Theory of Intuition, 62. Levinas seems to be arguing that the objectification being done by theoretical intentionality is the positing of its object as a “non-immanent” existent. Consciousness, then, is always thinking the real existence of objects. If this is the case, then it is easy to see how Levinas sees Husserl’s work as ontological, for what are first presented as epistemological conditions are reconceived as ontological ones in light of an existing object of consciousness. But Levinas understands that the phenomenological reduction calls for a release from ontological considerations. He complains that Husserl’s philosophy “demonstrates that the notion of existence remains

be foundational and all other intentions to be grafted onto the theoretical. In other words, before there can be a primary field of relation where subject and object are derivative terms, there must be something like an intentional assertion that objects are there to be desired or valued or found useful.

At this point, we do need to make a corrective note concerning Levinas's interpretation that Husserl depends upon representation. When Levinas wrote the Theory of Intuition there were no other translations of Husserl's works; consequently, the French terminology set in his dissertation were the result of his understanding of Husserl's vocabulary alone. In the case of representation, Levinas chose a term that most translators and interpreters of Husserl deem incongruent with Husserl's phenomenology, and I agree.<sup>73</sup> The very idea of re-presentation assumes that something that was present is being made present again. For Levinas and his careful discussion of Husserl's acts of consciousness, re-presentation is more than simply presenting an object again, but the effect is similar. Based upon his view that Husserl's phenomenology is at root an ontology, the re-presenting act presents again the ontological status of what is phenomenologically intended, that an object is there for the possibility of other intentional relations. This claim, however, seems fundamentally opposed to the very idea

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for [Husserl] tightly bound to the notion of theory, to the notion of knowledge, *despite all the elements in his system which seem to lead us to a richer notion of existence than mere presence of an object to a contemplative consciousness,*" 134 (My italics).

<sup>73</sup> André Orianne, the translator for the English version of Levinas's dissertation makes this comment at the very beginning. Instead of translating Levinas's French translation of Husserl into English, Orianne felt it would be better to use the established English translations. Whenever Levinas's explication calls for "representation," Orianne renders it as such, but in those quotes to which Levinas refers, "representation" does not appear but, rather, "presentation." The difference suggests a different way of understanding what Husserl is saying.

of intentionality, which is always in relation to an object being “presented.” After many translators and students of Husserl have worked upon Husserl’s texts, the consensus is that the proper translation for *Vorstellung* is not “representation” but simply “presentation.” The difference in these translations could mean the difference in whether or not Levinas has a correct understanding of Husserl or not. In fact, as it pertains to Levinas’s understanding of “representation,” he does not read Husserl well, but we do not need to correct that here. As we shall see in the third section of this chapter, Levinas clearly understands the “spirit” of Husserl’s phenomenology when he finds within Husserl arguments to reject “representation.”

Having interpreted Husserl as presupposing theory, Levinas broaches two questions already asked by Heidegger: 1. How is the phenomenological reduction possible in Husserl’s phenomenology if the transcendental subject to which Husserl reduces the conscious self is already theoretically presumed? 2. What is the main attitude toward reality if not that of theoretical contemplation, i.e., where does the phenomenologist start?

In regard to our first question, Levinas summarizes the nature of his critique of Husserl’s dependence upon the theoretical with these remarks in the conclusion of his dissertation: “The freedom and impulse which lead us to reduction and philosophical intuition present by themselves nothing new with respect to the freedom and stimulation of theory. The latter is taken as primary, so that Husserl gives himself the freedom of theory just as he gives himself theory.”<sup>74</sup> If it is the case, as Levinas argues, that Husserl relies upon objectification at the basis of all intentional acts, then the theoretical

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<sup>74</sup> Levinas, Theory of Intuition, 157.

dimension is presupposed rather than supported. Self-given theory undermines the possibility of a phenomenological reduction in two ways. On the one hand, the ability for a situated phenomenological observer to realize the naïve attitude and escape it appears in jeopardy. Theoretically, a phenomenologist reflects upon conscious acts with the realization that consciousness is absolutely given, according to theoretical argumentation.<sup>75</sup> The difficulty lies in the nature of theoretical consciousness being present within the naïve attitude, and if it is so present, then it cannot be used as a way out of that naïveté. On the other hand, with regard to the second difficulty, if the transcendental subject of Husserl's phenomenology must rely upon a theoretical ground, then acts of consciousness are always, already under theoretical scrutiny. As such, the lived experiences of surprise, the unsuspected, and horror seem logically impossible since these experiences presuppose a lack of observation wherein the theoretical is thwarted, in some way, from making full sense of the act.

Levinas's criticism of Husserl reveals the Heideggerian influence, and Levinas does little in the way of offering a correction for the theoretical dependency he uncovers; however, what correction is present owes its entirety to Heidegger. In the place of Husserl's transcendental consciousness, Levinas offers Heidegger's existential field of "care": "Is not the world presented in its very being as a center of action, as a field of

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<sup>75</sup> We can emphasize the Heideggerian origin of Levinas's criticism by reference to Being and Time, just one of several materials with which Levinas was familiar which could give rise to his critique. In § 25, Heidegger discusses the "who" of Dasein and asks "Is it then *a priori* self-evident that the access to Da-sein must be simple perceiving reflection of the I of acts?" If phenomenology is to uncover the ontological conditions of Being, it cannot do so under ontic reflection, an obvious jab at Husserl's transcendental, yet theoretically bound, subject.



activity or of *care* – to speak the language of Martin Heidegger.”<sup>76</sup> That which is investigated is that which matters to the conscious subject, a field of value and history.<sup>77</sup> If we are in a search for the origins of reality, then we must search for those origins within life. In these few remarks and the critique of theory, Levinas aligns himself with the very ideas which Husserl considered anthropology when reading Being and Time.

### **Derrida, Levinas, and Heideggerian Ontology**

For a time after the dissertation, Levinas pursued his study of Heidegger, enamored with ontological phenomenology. In 1932, he published the article, “Martin Heidegger and Ontology.”<sup>78</sup> He explained in a footnote that the article was the workings of the early chapters of a book on the subject. Levinas, therein, esteemed Heidegger as “one of the apogees of the phenomenological movement” and that “fame has not been mistaken and did not come too late.”<sup>79</sup> Levinas never completed the book he had promised, and the praise for Heidegger that appeared in the 1932 essay had been muted when the article was reprinted in 1949 as a part of a collection of essays by Levinas entitled, Discovering Existence with Husserl and Heidegger. What happened in the

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<sup>76</sup> Levinas, Theory of Intuition, 119.

<sup>77</sup> Heidegger was not the only one to be working on Husserl’s lack of historicity. Husserl was also familiar with this criticism from Georg Misch, Lebensphilosophie und Phänomenologie: eine Auseinandersetzung d. Dilthey’schen richtung m. Heidegger u. Husserl (Bonn: Cohen, 1930).

<sup>78</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “Martin Heidegger and Ontology,” in Revue Philosophique de la France et de l’Etranger 57 (1932), 395 – 431. A slightly revised edition appears in En découvrant l’existence avec Husserl et Heidegger (Paris: Vrin, 1949), 53 – 76.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 395.

intervening years on the world stage with National Socialism and World War II had changed Levinas's outlook concerning Heidegger's philosophy.

Levinas's move away from Heideggerian ontology and his reason for never completing the book which "Martin Heidegger and Ontology" was meant to begin was as much a result of political history as it was a difference in philosophy. In fact, Heidegger's involvement with National Socialism undermined for Levinas the positive possibilities he had envisioned after reading Being and Time.<sup>80</sup> The starting point of a Dasein centered account of being, as it appeared in Heidegger's enduring work, was reconceived in the early thirties by Heidegger in the form of an account of the history of being. Heidegger's account of history was apocalyptic – inauthentic lives caught up in a "technological frenzy" were at the point of bringing "annihilation."<sup>81</sup> The Weimar Republic's economic debacle had left Germany poor, defenseless, and unstable. National Socialism seemed to offer recourse out of History's spiral with promises to re-establish the values and simplicity of the past. Heidegger's "Rectoral Address" (May 27, 1933) encapsulates his optimism for the conservative movement underway: "[The beginning of our spiritual historical being] does not lie behind us, as something that was long ago, but stands before us . . . There it awaits us, as a distant command bidding us catch up with its

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<sup>80</sup> Levinas's positive reading of Being and Time are evident throughout his writings. In 1981, on a radio interview in France now in print as Ethics and Infinity, Levinas recognizes that the homage he pays to Heidegger, "seems pale to the enthusiastic disciples of the great philosopher," 41. Nevertheless, he asserts that Being and Time is a "sovereign exercise of phenomenology" and "this exercise is extremely brilliant and convincing," 39 – 40.

<sup>81</sup> Heidegger makes this historical turn transparent in his 1935 lecture course: An Introduction to Metaphysics, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959) 31 – 32.

greatness.”<sup>82</sup> This mission of retrieving one’s spiritual beginning from the future was one for the “German *Volk*.” Being, formerly approached through an individual Dasein, was now grasped as the historical inheritance of the *Volk*, mimicking the *völkische* ideology of Nazism.

Victor Faria’s 1987 book, Heidegger and Nazism, marks the beginning of serious debate over how to understand Heidegger’s grave mistake.<sup>83</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, Charles Guignon, Hubert Dreyfus and others have written, not to excuse Heidegger, but to place him within a wider context of historical events such that his Nazi involvement seems more a misunderstanding of the political movement motivated by Heidegger’s own philosophical reasoning than a desire for totalitarianism.<sup>84</sup> Guignon goes so far as to say that Heidegger was a “fairly minor, almost laughable actor in a much wider wave of support for Hitler.”<sup>85</sup> These readings of Heidegger’s involvement seem lost on Levinas, who suffered the waves of anti-Semitism in Europe, fought German occupation in France, and was held a prisoner of war. While Levinas admires the philosopher of Being

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<sup>82</sup> Martin Heidegger, “The Self-Assertion of the German University and the Rectorate 1933/34: Facts and Thoughts,” trans. K. Harries, Review of Metaphysics, 38 (March 1985), 473. This address by Heidegger comes shortly after his entry into the Nazi party on May 1, 1933.

<sup>83</sup> Victor Faria, Heidegger and Nazism, ed. Joseph Margolis and Tom Rockmore (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989).

<sup>84</sup> Pierre Bourdieu The Political Ontology of Martin Heidegger, trans. P. Collier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991). Charles B. Guignon, “Introduction,” Cambridge Companion to Heidegger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 26 – 36. Hubert L. Dreyfus, “Heidegger on the Connection between Nihilism, Art, Technology, and Politics,” Cambridge Companion to Heidegger, 311 – 315.

<sup>85</sup> Charles Guignon, “Introduction,” 27.

and Time, he remarked, in his 1981 interview that, “Heidegger has never been exculpated in my eyes from his participation in National Socialism.”<sup>86</sup>

After World War II, Levinas makes a point in his 1947 book Existence and Existents that he felt “the profound need to leave the climate of [Heidegger’s] philosophy.”<sup>87</sup> Most interpreters of Levinas have seen this break as a philosophical difference of opinion centered on the way in which Levinas and Heidegger see the work of ontology. However, Robert Bernasconi has argued that the “climate” Levinas desires most to leave is that of National Socialism, tying together both the philosophical and political.<sup>88</sup> Consequently, Levinas’s critique of ontology is not simply to introduce an ethical foundation into philosophy but to criticize ontology for its un-ethicality, of which Heidegger’s political bent was one applied example. The problem Levinas sees in Heidegger’s ontology is an outgrowth of his critique of Husserl’s intellectualism. Fundamental ontology, the study of world horizons, “presupposes the *factual situation* of the mind that knows,” which means the philosopher attempting to describe ultimate horizons is already within and open to those horizons: “The whole human being is ontology.”<sup>89</sup> For Levinas, the mind that knows and attempts to comprehend and write a

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<sup>86</sup> Levinas, Ethics and Infinity, 41.

<sup>87</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, Existence and Existents, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978), 19.

<sup>88</sup> Robert Bernasconi, “Levinas and the Struggle for Existence,” presented at Emory University Conference, “Addressing Levinas,” 1999. Now published in Addressing Levinas, ed. Eric Sean Nelson, Antje Kapust, and Kent Still (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2005), 170ff.

<sup>89</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “Is Ontology Fundamental,” in Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings, ed. Adriaan Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 2 – 3.

description of world horizons is attempting to comprehend more than is available to our theoretical intentions. “Our consciousness,” Levinas states, “and our mastery of reality through consciousness do not exhaust our relation with reality, to which we are always present through all the density of our being.”<sup>90</sup> Ontology, however, reduces, by way of its analysis and description, all human relation with reality to the theoretical comprehension of the particular relation *within* the formal structure. What Levinas finds so unethical in this reduction is that the particular relation becomes subordinated to the theory of being, and if the relation between persons, for instance, is also subordinated, then the treatment of persons becomes dependent upon the way in which being is perceived. Heidegger’s involvement in National Socialism was, for Levinas, a direct consequence of his ‘mis’- application of ontology.

The culmination of Levinas’s critique of Heidegger and attempt to offer a better philosophy arrived in the form of Totality and Infinity, the main ideas of which can be traced in many of his essays written prior. While the content of Levinas’s first major philosophical work was expected, Jacques Derrida responded in an unexpected way in his essay, “Violence and Metaphysics,” on behalf of “two Greeks named Husserl and Heidegger,” asserting that Levinas’s work was fundamentally grounded in ontology.<sup>91</sup> In

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<sup>90</sup> Levinas, “Is Ontology Fundamental,” 4.

<sup>91</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” in Writing and Difference, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 83. Derrida’s title references Levinas’s two main points as we have been discussing. “Violence” refers to the unethicality within ontology that reduces otherness, the more than comprehensible, to the level of analysis and theoretical description. “Metaphysics” is Levinas’s reappropriation of the traditional philosophical term that mirrors Heidegger’s discussion of ontology. Just as Heidegger desires to resurrect the ancient philosophy of ontology, Levinas seeks a philosophy that preserves ethicality and dubs such “metaphysics.”

essence, Derrida makes the claim that Levinas, at his most anti-Heideggerian, is still a Heideggerian.

Levinas's Heideggerian mistake begins, according to Derrida, with the attempt to write a philosophy that takes as its object the otherness of the other (person) and considering it as the *tout autre*. If something is indeed "wholly other," then it would be as Derrida describes it, an "unthinkable-impossible-unutterable beyond."<sup>92</sup> Speaking, or writing, about what is "wholly other" cannot be done. If Levinas desires to affirm language, which is as he seems, since he claims that the simple greeting "*bonjour*" holds the moment of encounter with the "wholly other," then he cannot affirm otherness as something absolute, for language can only describe, or communicate with, that with which we are connected in some form.<sup>93</sup>

Derrida agrees with Levinas that the otherness of the other person is inaccessible, meaning the *Erlebnisse*, the lived experiences as lived by the other, cannot be my lived experiences. Without doubt, others can communicate with me about what was experienced, but the need for the medium of language to share what has been sensed actually preserves the barrier of transcendence. However, the fact that language is shared and that language can share experiences suggests that the other person, in glorious transcendence, is actually like me, an alter ego. Derrida suggests, in fact, that the other

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<sup>92</sup> Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," p.114.

<sup>93</sup> Derrida offers another possible way of dealing with the "wholly other." "Violence and Metaphysics" is not only a discussion of Levinas's philosophy but also a response to those who have claimed Derrida's philosophy is linked with that of Negative Theology. Derrida offers that one can claim to have an intuitive contact with the wholly other that is positive, as negative theology does, as long as one keeps a "disdain for discourse." However, just like negative theology, Levinas cannot help but speak/write.

person can only be “wholly other” within well defined limits. Levinas can only be correct, Derrida claims, if the ethical horizon of the “wholly other” is contained within an even wider horizon which ensures a certain symmetry between myself and an alter ego.<sup>94</sup> The reason that the other can be recognized to be so absolutely other than myself is because the other appears within an ontological structure that ensures our virtual sameness.<sup>95</sup> Consequently, Levinas needs Heidegger’s ontology to conform the ontic existence of human beings before one can recognize and be ethically bound by the otherness of the other person. Otherness, then, depends upon the ontological horizon.

Derrida’s accusation that Levinas is dependent upon Heidegger goes beyond the need for ontology. As we have seen, Levinas makes claims for the need to honour and respect the impossible advent of the otherness of the other person, an advent which he, at times, links to a Jewish wisdom unrealized by philosophy, which he dubs “Greek.”<sup>96</sup> As Derrida has argued, however, the ontological dependence and reliance upon language makes it such that “nothing can so profoundly *solicit* the Greek *logos* – philosophy – than this irruption of the *tout autre*.”<sup>97</sup> The criticism, then, is that Levinas not only fails to properly signal the wholly other (because the wholly other cannot be signaled), but

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<sup>94</sup> Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” 126.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>96</sup> We shall investigate Levinas’s opposition between Jew and Greek in the second chapter of this dissertation. While this may seem strange, constructed, or even inflammatory, the distinction has become an important one in some continental philosophy being done today. Derrida also takes up the distinction in agreement with the “spirit” of Levinas’s work if not the way it works out philosophically in Levinas’s texts. John Caputo and others, following both of these French philosophers, similarly rely upon the distinction, but with added religious import.

<sup>97</sup> Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” 152.

Levinas, in fact, emphasizes Greek philosophy rather than pointing to something more than philosophy can offer.

John Caputo, in elaborating Derrida's essay, complements (however, *compliments* works just as well, methinks) Derrida's critique by reflecting upon Levinas's apparent contradiction wherein Levinas wants a distinction between a Jewish wisdom and a Greek philosophy but also seems to avow that Greek philosophy is sufficient to understanding. Caputo quotes from Difficult Liberty where Levinas states that the Greek *logos* is "the medium of all comprehension and of all understanding in which all truth is reflected."<sup>98</sup> Philosophy, it seems, while distinct from Jewish wisdom, can encompass Jewish wisdom if the Judaic has said something true. Levinas often calls his philosophy a translation of the Hebraic into the Greek. Philosophy, then, cannot be surprised by the wholly other; it is ready for any truth, even one as yet unearthed. Caputo addresses this faith in philosophy directly saying, "About that, I think, Levinas is fundamentally mistaken, surprisingly far too philosophical, far too Greek, and – he will hate this – far too Heideggerian."<sup>99</sup> Essentially, then, by trusting in philosophy for the possibility of understanding, even of simply stating the otherness of the other, Levinas has fallen into the same trap he springs on Heidegger. The otherness of the other, so cherished by Levinas, appears enclosed within a totality constructed by Levinas's Greek philosophy.

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<sup>98</sup> John Caputo discusses and supplements Derrida's arguments in The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 20 – 26. He addresses Levinas's quote specifically on page 24.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.



## Levinas and the “Spirit” of Phenomenology

In order for Levinas to finally “escape the climate of Heidegger,” he would have to find a key that would allow him to unlock the egological totalities instituted by ontology. Levinas discovers this key in the unlikely phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, unlikely because it was Levinas’s criticism of Husserl’s theory and representation, a prison of its own, that lead him to Heidegger, whom Levinas also came to reject. Within the seminal work of Husserl and Levinas’s return to Husserl’s texts, Levinas finds seeds that do not lead to theory or representation but to the possibility of phenomenology conceived in a broader and deeper manner where theory has its place but a place among a multiplicity of intentional possibilities rather than the necessary and primary starting point of phenomenological description. Levinas’s new focus places more emphasis upon intentionality’s “sense-bestowal,” the discovery of meaning transcendent to and more than the appearing of the object yet rooted in the multi-faceted ways the object appears, and the concept of horizon, the recognition of consciousness as situated or as “in the world.” Levinas’s turn leaves behind his interpretation of Husserl’s phenomenology as ontology in favor of disclosing the ways in which the world appears as meaningful. In this scheme, ontology would be just one way in which existence meaningfully appears, offering the possibility of seeing other meaningful horizons, ethical horizons, as fundamental in their own right. Using phenomenology in this way would not only allow Levinas to escape Heidegger’s climate but also to circumvent Derrida’s critique which claims ontology to be logically prior in any philosophical endeavor.

What germinates in Levinas’s reorientation is the possibility of giving a phenomenological description of “otherness,” an encounter with an absence that is not an

experience but is a meaningful horizon within which intentionality is situated. Levinas's desire for a phenomenology of the other is evident as early as his dissertation. "The reduction to an *ego*, the *egological reduction*, can be only a first step toward phenomenology. We must also discover 'others' and the intersubjective world."<sup>100</sup> Already familiar with Husserl's fifth Cartesian Meditation and its emphasis on intersubjectivity by the time of his dissertation, Levinas was even then glimpsing the phenomenological journey he would undertake. However, realizing that he was beginning to envision his own role in the developing history of phenomenology, we must beware that Levinas would also attempt to distance himself from his predecessors. While I will argue that Levinas fits nicely within the "spirit" of phenomenology, we must not forget that he never retracts his critique concerning Husserl as fundamentally dependent upon theory and representation. What arises in Levinas's later re-evaluation of Husserl's phenomenology is a two-sided presentation: 1. Husserl as a philosopher of egological totality and 2. Husserl as the visionary that provides the seminal work that allows for the very ruin of totality and representation. Levinas never believes that what he finds concerning the latter should be taken as Husserl's real intentions; however, I believe we can say that they are well within the possibilities of Husserl's phenomenology. Whether the disagreement is the bravado of a young philosopher ready to strike out on his own or an honest case of misunderstanding we can only speculate.<sup>101</sup> In this section, we will see

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<sup>100</sup> Levinas, Theory of Intuition, 150.

<sup>101</sup> In defense of Levinas, let me just comment that Husserl and Heidegger are brilliant, seminal, and excruciatingly hard to grasp at times. If Levinas's familiarity with Husserl's and Heidegger's published works and a brief but intense time of studying with these philosophers left him with some misconceptions that became rooted in his philosophy, I

how Levinas re-reads Husserl to arrive at the “spirit” of phenomenology, following his understanding of intentionality as “sense-bestowal” and of horizons of meaning.

Before we begin to explicate Levinas’s resonance with the spirit of phenomenology, let us briefly discuss the manner in which Husserl becomes perceived as a philosopher of totality. Keeping in mind that theory and representation are already part of Levinas’s critique, Levinas refines his criticism – even to the point of reinterpreting representation – to reflect the ways in which Husserl creates egological totalities.

Representation (Levinas’s translation of *Vorstellung*), remaining the primary work of consciousness for Levinas, is the act of consciousness identifying or bestowing meaning; however, identification can be an infinite process without some core against which to measure repeated manifestations. For Levinas, “The process of identification can be infinite, but it is concluded in self-evidence, in the presence of the object in person before consciousness.”<sup>102</sup> The multiple appearings of an object are attended by a transcendent meaning that makes sense because intentional consciousness intuits; consciousness grounded in self evidence is “the very penetration to the true.” In some sense, Levinas’s re-evaluation of Husserl paints Husserl in a more positive light than before, once Levinas focuses upon the epistemological aspect of intentionality, an interpretation much more Husserlian than Levinas’s ontological one which he offered in his dissertation. Husserl’s philosophy, however, is still limited in the sense that “the theory of intentionality in Husserl identifies mind with intellection and intellection with light.”

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can only empathize, not ignoring my own weakness with these thinkers. Let us celebrate what he was able to accomplish.

<sup>102</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “The Work of Edmund Husserl,” in Discovering Existence with Husserl, trans. Richard A. Cohen and Michael B. Smith (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 61.

Once again, we see the danger of understanding *Vorstellung* as representation, for even though Levinas is more correctly assessing intentional consciousness as a process of sense-bestowal, Levinas emphasizes the act as an intellectual grasping initiated, conditioned, and consummated by and within consciousness even though he will see another possible way of understanding Husserl. This interpretation comes strictly from Levinas's reading of Ideas I. On the one hand, Levinas is concerned to state that perception has a perceptual sense, a *noema*, a perceived as perceived, which is grounded in the concrete, but because the conscious field is that from which the subject and object are derived, the *noema* is only a distinction in the singular field that must always exist with a correlate *noesis*. The multiplicity of views, each view a self contained unity, is parallel to a noetic field wherein the views are held together in a functional manifold.<sup>103</sup> Levinas will claim, however, that Husserl founds the correlation between *noesis* and *noema* in a spontaneous ego, in the very presence of a subject to the world, a subject the very idea of which was supposed to be derived from the conscious field. Husserl states:

Every positing begins with a point of initiation, with a positional point of origin. . . This initiation belongs precisely to the positing as positing qua distinctive mode of original actionality. . . Every act of no matter what species can begin in the mode of spontaneity pertaining, so to speak, to its creative beginning in which the pure Ego makes its appearance as the subject of the spontaneity.<sup>104</sup>

Husserl's quote appears to Levinas as a privileging of the active and spontaneous ego ready to take hold and constitute sense, making the world into a totality for the ego, as Husserl's very next lines might suggest: "This mode of initiating is immediately, and according to an eidetic necessity, converted into another mode. For example, perceptual

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<sup>103</sup> Husserl, Ideas I, §98.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, §122.

*seizing upon, taking hold of*, are immediately and without a break changed into the ‘*having in one’s grip.*’” As Levinas’s philosophy comes to maturity, Husserl’s description here will become the very language Levinas cites as indicating the violence done by an ego encountering and capturing its world, representing the world in consciousness. There is no doubt that Husserl’s choice of language, making reference to the “pure Ego,” proves a stumbling block for many readers, but if we want to find consistency in Husserl’s philosophy, then we must rethink the meaning of the Ego. If the Ego is simply the subject consciously or even unconsciously orienting intentionality, then Levinas’s critique should hold, but such a reading would suggest that intentionality is a controllable quality of the ego after Levinas has already argued that the subject *is* intentionality. However, taking the Ego as conformable with the conscious intentional field improves the consistency of the claim that every act begins in a pure spontaneous Ego even when the possibility of a subject is derived from the very field generated by the Ego’s actions. While Levinas does not see this as Husserl’s intent, let us investigate how Levinas understands intentional consciousness as more than presumed intellection and representation, interpretations which he derives from Husserl’s work.

In 1940, Levinas published a second expository work on Husserl’s phenomenology entitled, “The Work of Edmund Husserl.” This essay comes after Heidegger’s involvement in the Nazi party and before Levinas’s interment as a prisoner of war by Germany in World War II. This means that Levinas had shaken off his infatuation with Heidegger’s philosophy if not his respect and had turned back for another look at Husserl. While it is recognized that Levinas ventures his own ethical

philosophy only after his imprisonment, we can see, nevertheless, the nascent return to Husserl that will mark his later work.

Much of Levinas's 1940 essay reiterates the points made earlier in The Theory of Intuition; however, "The Work of Edmund Husserl" makes a major turn away from his dissertation when he seeks to unhook representation from theory. While he still asserts that Husserl "maintains that every intention is either an objectifying act or supported by one" and that "in Husserl, theoretical consciousness is at once universal and primary," Levinas claims "perhaps it would be unjust to qualify [Husserl's philosophy] as intellectualism."<sup>105</sup> These assertions, which seem inconsistent on the surface, are a result of Levinas taking more seriously the multiplicity of intentions that are a part of the lived experience, specifically the non-theoretical intentions of feeling, desiring, and willing. By 1940, Levinas clearly asserts that "the felt, the willed, the desired are not things."<sup>106</sup> This stands in stark contrast to his dissertation where he maintains that regardless of the multiplicity of intentions in complex acts, the desired, the willed, and the felt are present in the "mode of existence of theoretical objects."<sup>107</sup> While it is true that one can contemplate a desired object – a car, a diploma, etc. – and that it is often asserted the object has the quality of being desirable, it is not necessarily the case that these feelings are reducible to subjective opinions about the object. The felt, the willed and the desired are meanings in their own right.

As we saw in our discussion of The Theory of Intuition, Levinas was concerned with showing the ways in which Husserl's phenomenology operated as an ontology

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<sup>105</sup> Levinas, "The Work of Edmund Husserl," 60.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 62.

rooting phenomenological analysis in the intuiting and representing of the transcendent object. While Levinas never changes his reading that consciousness of an object means an intuiting of the world that is there and is grasped in an intentional manner (nor should he undo such a reading), his return to explicating Husserl uncovers the purpose of phenomenological analysis to be a description of the meaningfulness of the manifest world, which is the heart of the epistemological undertaking of phenomenology. Levinas shifts from the representation of the transcendent object to the transcendent meaning bestowed by intentional consciousness: “The relation of intentionality is nothing like the relations between real objects. *It is essentially the act of bestowing a meaning (Sinngebung).*”<sup>108</sup> Levinas understands the bestowing of meaning as a process of identification wherein the multiple aspects of what is experienced is synthesized into a meaningful unity. Each momentary presentation is a moment of one’s lived experience, which includes every aspect of mental life, even those aspects that are not primarily theoretical. The resulting transcendent unity “represents” the world of experience, but this new understanding of representation can now be divorced from the theoretical critique offered in his dissertation, for while the transcendent meaning bestowed in intentionality can be disclosed in reflection, this notion of representation must operate prior to contemplation.

Because “representation,” “objectification,” and “identification” as the meaning giving work of intentionality are now distinguished from theory, we can understand Levinas’s claim that “it would be unjust to qualify [phenomenology] as intellectualism, since the primacy accorded to the notion of meaning over the notion of object to

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<sup>108</sup> Levinas, “The Work of Edmund Husserl,” 59.

characterize thought prevents this.”<sup>109</sup> It would seem as though Levinas has explicated Husserl in a way that would put to rest the theoretical critique, but a very short paragraph in “The Work of Edmund Husserl” reminds us that Levinas never relinquishes his earliest criticism. Instead of a new understanding of Husserl emerging, we see “The Work of Edmund Husserl” as not only explication but also as Levinas using Husserl against Husserl, a tactic that he will employ time and time again. Consequently, Levinas is not undoing phenomenology when he attacks Husserl so much as investigating a broader phenomenological perspective. If we turn our inquiry to why Levinas retains his criticism, we will see another step Levinas must take for his broader perspective.

In addition to the major themes of intuition and representation that have marked Levinas’s analysis of Husserl thus far, Levinas begins after his dissertation a study of Husserl’s concept of time. He interjects into his discussion of representation, which now takes shape as intentionality as meaning bestower, the assertion: “In the theory of the experience of immanent time, and in [Husserl’s] investigations of prejudicative experience – the primary experience – this primordial role of representation is likewise affirmed. . . Thus, in Husserl, theoretical consciousness is at once universal and primary.”<sup>110</sup> Even if representation (*Vorstellung*) is not a theoretical operation in primary lived experience, phenomenology’s connection with immanent time, specifically the need to consult memory in reflection, reveals another form of representation, namely “presentification” (*Vergegenwärtigung*), that operates over time to provide consciousness with a reliable link to the past. For Husserl, the present always sits within the context of what has gone before (retention) with what is anticipated or expected (protention). The

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<sup>109</sup> Levinas, “The Work of Edmund Husserl,” 60.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.



intentional lived experiences which passed in time were determined by the same meaning-bestowing process operative at the “now” moment. Memory assures fluid continuity between what was meaningful in the past and what is meaningful in the present because consciousness in the present can always make present again (re-present) what is in the memory.<sup>111</sup> To this effect, Husserl states: “It is natural to say at first (as Brentano did) that the actually present perception becomes constituted as presentation on the basis of sensations and that primary memory becomes constituted as representation, as re-presentation (*Vergegenwärtigung*), on the basis of phantasies.”<sup>112</sup> What lies held within these phantasies and what is directly accessible to consciousness as a result of re-presentation is what allows Levinas to retain his critique of phenomenology based upon theory. The ego relies upon re-presentations constituted by the ego in memory for insight into the meaningfulness of lived experience. Although transcendent meaning as a product of intentionality is no longer theoretical, the necessity of relying upon memory and its representational underpinning fuels Levinas’s theoretical critique.

Just as Levinas broadened his perspective of phenomenology when he reappraised *Vorstellung* as the non-theoretical meaning-bestowing task of intentionality, Levinas will

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<sup>111</sup> See Rudolph Bernet, “Levinas’s Critique of Husserl,” 88-89.

<sup>112</sup> Edmund Husserl, *The Phenomenology of Internal Time Consciousness*, trans. James Churchill. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964) §14. Our quote, which points to the roots of Levinas’s critique, is followed by objections by Husserl against such a simplistic understanding. Even within our quote itself is the phrase “it is natural to say at first,” as though the first look at the issue of memory will need adjusting. What Husserl goes on to argue is that the continuity of past and present makes it such that a “continuity of apprehension is still there” even when what was present has faded away. Consequently, “everything is like perception and primary memory and yet is not itself perception and primary memory.” What Husserl means here is that the nature of intentional consciousness does not, in fact, re-present what has passed, but is intentionally conscious of a memory as a “presentation.”

again broaden his perspective by addressing Husserl's supposed reliance upon theory with respect to immanent time. This second re-evaluation can be seamlessly integrated with Levinas's focus upon alterity and his later, more mature philosophy as Rudolph Bernet explains in his essay, "Levinas's Critique of Husserl." Nevertheless, the change can be traced, once again, to Levinas's early discussions of Husserl, since it was his investigation into *Vorstellung* and his new understanding of intentionality that stimulated his broader understanding. Levinas recognizes that intentionality, as especially evidenced by the affective states of will, desire, and feeling, does not posit an object but, rather, is the field from which subject and object are derived. Levinas refers to this understanding of intentionality as "the most fecund idea contributed by phenomenology."<sup>113</sup> We are aware, however, that Levinas does not consider his non-theoretical reading of Husserl to be what Husserl intended. Therefore, as Levinas continues to discuss Husserl's intellection, he is now at the point of readiness to go beyond theory in other aspects of phenomenology as well.

The theory of intentionality in Husserl, linked so closely to his theory of self-evidence, in the final analysis, identifies mind with intellection, and intellection with light. *If we wanted to distance ourselves from Husserl's terminology and characteristic mode of expression* (my italics), we would say that self-evidence is a unique situation: in the case of self-evidence the mind, while receiving something foreign, is also the origin of what it receives. It is always active. The fact that in self-evidence the world is a given, that there is always a given for the mind, is not only found to be in agreement with the idea of activity, but is presupposed by that activity. A given world is a world where we can be free without this freedom being purely negative. The self-evidence of a given world, more than the non-engagement of the mind in things, is the positive accomplishment of freedom.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Levinas, "The Work of Edmund Husserl," 60.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

Much of Levinas's essay, "The Work of Edmund Husserl," focuses upon the intellection and theory he still finds in Husserl's philosophy; however, it is at points like the above quote where something new begins to take form. At the end of his dissertation, Levinas found the freedom of the ego to be assumed on the part of Husserl's phenomenology, but just a few years later, freedom is the possibility of the ego's having meaning. It is no longer something Levinas considers assumed; it is the basic orientation of the ego as constitutive of the world as meaningful. Put another way, "intentionality is nothing but the very accomplishment of freedom."<sup>115</sup> Consequently, the thrust of much of "The Work of Edmund Husserl" is the explication of the subject as transcendently constituting and, as a result, not in-the-world. This plays into Levinas's critique of phenomenology as promulgating the ego as a totalizing entity. What Levinas claims in our quote in which he "distances" himself from Husserl's terminology suggests something more, a subject in reciprocity with the world, an ego actively constituting that which is already given: a chiasmus of auto-affection and hetero-affection.

Levinas's answer then to the problem of intellection and theory at the basis of immanent time involves freeing time and conditions of meaning from the sole possession of the ego. While representation remains a difficulty for Levinas as it is used in Husserl's phenomenology of time, he relieves the critique of intellection by freeing freedom from its separation from the world. If the ego, in its mode of transcendental constitution, is not-in-the-world and needs to resort to the mediary of representation to make the past present again, then the ego seems truly bound to theory to make any claim concerning the

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<sup>115</sup> Levinas, "The Work of Edmund Husserl," 76.

intuited object.<sup>116</sup> The free ego that sits in the chiasm of auto/hetero-affection, rather than being dependent upon theory, sits in the juncture where “the antinomy of spontaneity and passivity is eliminated in the mind grasped at the level of the *Urimpression*.”<sup>117</sup> For Husserl as well as Levinas, the *Urimpression* is that conceptual moment in the “now” when consciousness originally accepts the givenness of the world but also spontaneously initiates its constituting intentionality. Consciousness, in this spontaneous moment, engages in the constitution of meaning such that thought is never without concepts, but the fact that consciousness receives the given world at the moment of the *Urimpression* also places the affected consciousness within a world of given horizons. The subject appears as a nexus of meaningful structures which are integrated in manifold to produce the possibility of human experience. Levinas’s task, now, is to disclose these layers.

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<sup>116</sup>Levinas’s leap forward in his understanding of phenomenology is rooted in an early problem which Husserl himself also recognized and dealt with in his phenomenology of “internal time analysis.” The main difficulty centered on the mediating representation since this “phantasm” of memory separates the conscious act from the object of consciousness. Such a dualism invokes the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. The separation between consciousness and object originates with a description of the subject’s sense of the object. As we have already stated, subject and object are already derivative from the analysis of the conscious field. In essence, Husserl begins his time-analysis within the very natural attitude from which he desires to escape. The change that Husserl makes and which Levinas does not discuss is a change away from description within the natural attitude to a description of the formal structure of time within the phenomenological field. At this point, the manner of presentation of sensory content is not as important as the temporal structure that conditions the manner in which that content is presented. Consequently, what is in memory can now be called a presentation, i.e. as a “presentification,” rather than a representation because the sensory content held in memory is presented in the now moment as a memory and not as a representation of what was present in the past.

<sup>117</sup> Levinas, “The Work of Edmund Husserl,” 78.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **Levinas and Judaism: The Possibility of a Religious Phenomenology**

#### **Introduction**

In chapter one, we endeavored to place Levinas within the phenomenological tradition by arguing for a certain understanding of the “spirit of phenomenology,” foregoing any argument showing Levinas’s strict adherence to Husserlian methodology. We justified such a tack by arguing that Husserl himself was never comfortable with any one formulation of his phenomenological methodology but grew consistently concerning his understanding of the structures in need of disclosure through one’s description of lived experience, wherein lived experience is taken as that unity of meaningful experience. While Husserl’s earliest writings utilized straightforward descriptive analysis exclusively on the *as/for* relationship, his exploration into the horizontal structures, the *in/from* relationship, made the shortcomings of such analysis apparent and stipulated Husserl’s subsequent new beginnings. Levinas claims to be uncovering horizontal structures that govern ethical relationships and which are at the very heart of the structure of the human ego, *from* which arises the sense-bestowal of human experience. The argument put forward in chapter one would deal sufficiently with some detractors who balk at Levinas’s claim to follow phenomenology by placing him within the evolving methodology of horizontal structures, but one challenge remains before we can say with authority that Levinas should, without reservation, be considered within the realm of phenomenological philosophy. Given that phenomenology begins with a return to the “things themselves” and that anything that counts as a presupposition informing upon our experience that would colour our viewing of the “things themselves” should be bracketed off, it becomes mandatory that any defense of Levinas’s phenomenological philosophy

address Levinas's copious references to God and allusions to Levinas's own Judaic background.<sup>118</sup> God, in traditional usage of the term, seems impossible to address as one of the "things themselves," or as even a structure implicated in the appearing of the "things themselves," and Judaism, in its everyday connotation, is full of presupposed traditions, revelations, and theology. The task of exonerating Levinas will involve proposing an understanding of the terms "God" and "Judaism" that avoid phenomenology's demand to place them out of bounds.<sup>119</sup>

Students of phenomenology have questioned from its inception the connection between phenomenology and religion. Jean Hering, a student of Husserl, writes about many of the positives phenomenology can contribute to religious philosophy as early as 1925.<sup>120</sup> He argues that from the "angle of natural or positive religion" phenomenology could provide a method that is productive for religious philosophy and for the description

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<sup>118</sup> Edmund Husserl, Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy -- First Book: General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology, trans. F. Kersten (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1982 [1913]), §58, (hereafter Ideas I) includes the transcendence of God under the reduction, seemingly halting our investigation at the beginning.

<sup>119</sup> As this last sentence suggests, defending Levinas against accusations of allowing his ethnic background to pre-write his phenomenological description will involve coming to a new understanding of the terms "God" and "Judaism," meaning that we will constantly be playing with common sense definitions, which will be different from the technical understandings of theologians and Jewish scholars, which will be, in turn, different from the redefined concepts we will present as Emmanuel Levinas's understanding of them. Consequently, there will be a need for numerous scare quotes, and, in some sense, we could put quotes around every instance of "God" and "Judaism" in this chapter. I have elected, however, to use scare quotes only at those times when the chapter is about to make a thematic switch between meanings, alerting the reader to gather his or her wits and prepare for some manner of gestalt shift.

<sup>120</sup> Bernard G. Prusak, "Translator's Introduction," in Phenomenology and the "Theological Turn" (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000) proves very helpful in outlining this historical concern and contemporary debates over the connection between phenomenology and religion.

of religious phenomena.<sup>121</sup> However, Hering also warns about the future: “It is not difficult to foresee that the hour when [phenomenology] will become *à la mode* . . . will see the springing forth of a whole pseudophenomenological literature.”<sup>122</sup> Hering’s fear revolves around religious groups using phenomenology to justify various actions or instantiations of the Christian church, what amounts to a confusing of the eidetic and the empirical. In the case of Levinas’s philosophy, which Hering, of course, could not be directly addressing, we will still have to wonder whether or not Levinas is trying to use phenomenology to describe an essential truth of Judaism or a truth about humanity brought to relief in the Judaic context. Time and again, Levinas will describe the ethical relation as expressing the Judaic in us all, even when the ethical relation is shared between Gentiles.

Dominique Janicaud picks up the banner of warning against phenomenologists investigating the religious, in particular the wave of French phenomenologists who “suppose a non-phenomenological, metaphysical desire.” This desire “comes from ‘a land not of our birth.’”<sup>123</sup> This foreign land specifically refers to the influence of the other, the Absolutely Other, the Infinite, God and any other way to mention an origin of phenomena that cannot be grounded in the *cogitatio*, which must “play a central role” in

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<sup>121</sup> Jean Hering, Phénoménologie et philosophie religieuse. Étude sur la théorie de la connaissance religieuse (Strasbourg: Imprimerie Alsacienne, 1925), 7.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>123</sup> Dominique Janicaud, “Contours of the Turn,” in Phenomenology and the “Theological Turn”, 27. Within this quote from Janicaud, he cites Levinas’s Totality and Infinity, trans. A. Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 33-34. Among the French phenomenologists whom Janicaud challenges are Paul Ricoeur, Jean Louis Chrétien, and Jean-Luc Marion. Janicaud views Emmanuel Levinas as a pioneer in this field, often the catalyst for these “new phenomenologists.” Interestingly, this book also prints responses from some of the embattled “new phenomenologists.”

any phenomenology grounded in Husserl. Janicaud, unlike Hering, grounds much of his critique in what he sees as a betrayal of the reduction, which always leaves the phenomenologist with the transcendental ego in its “nudity.” The fashionable movement of French phenomenology, however, according to Janicaud, addresses the transcendent, and, indeed, many of the philosophers in question describe the other et al as transcendent, which makes the object of their phenomenology unavailable as phenomenon. Chapter one will be a sufficient answer for this critique *if* we can show that the manner in which transcendent applies to their descriptions is as a horizon that conditions experience. Such a horizon would be a non-object, a structural factor in the origination of human intentionality. In Levinas’s case, we should be prepared to see this intentionality as pathic rather than perceptual without any predisposition to rank the perceptual as more fundamental than the pathic.

As Prusak’s introduction to Phenomenology and the “Theological Turn” points out, Janicaud’s critique does not take into account Husserl’s development. The entire critique revolves around Husserl’s essay “Philosophy as Rigorous Science” (1911) and Ideas I.<sup>124</sup> While Ideas I is a cornerstone of Husserl’s philosophy, we have already shown that he ventures past the conceptions of phenomenology treated therein. Consequently, our response to Janicaud on this matter will be that he has turned phenomenology into a rigid discipline rather than an evolving methodology.

Chapter one, as a defense of investigating the transcendent, would be undermined if the transcendent were to also be directed by an established theology. Janicaud

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<sup>124</sup> Edmund Husserl, “Philosophy as Rigorous Science,” in Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy: Philosophy as Rigorous Science, and Philosophy and the Crisis of European Man, ed. and trans. Q. Lauer (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1965).



compounds the affront to phenomenology with the accusation that these philosophers are not only failing to add the transcendent God to the reduction but also the presuppositions of faith: “All is acquired and imposed from the outset, and this all is no little thing: nothing less than the God of the biblical tradition. Strict treason of the reduction that handed over the transcendental I to its nudity, here theology is restored with its parade of capital letters.”<sup>125</sup> The effect of the presupposed theology is not the adding of minute theological details to Levinas’s argument but the raising of various concepts to hubristic levels. Janicaud focuses on Levinas’s description of the desire the ego is said to have for the other, or for God. Desire quickly gets a capital “D,” what Janicaud would certainly consider a theological imposition wherein the Desire for the other gets attracted to the other’s transcendence and sanctions (or sanctifies) Desire as having special, untouchable and unquestionable qualities.<sup>126</sup> Desire, as well as other specially capitalized words, become objects of faith, according to Janicaud, since their origins are without any particular phenomena and Levinas’s biblical and Judaic background give away the faith at the basis of the elevations given to his disclosed concepts.

I shall argue, hereafter, that even though Levinas exercises religious vocabulary throughout, these words should not be taken with traditionally, religiously understood meanings. Religious language, in fact, offers a cache of “improper” language that more properly describes the phenomenon of the ethical encounter and the horizon of the ethical than does the expected and prescribed language of Greek philosophy. The description of the ethical relation as particularly Jewish, just as with religious language, should not be

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<sup>125</sup> Janicaud, “Contours of the Turn,” 27.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 27 ff.

taken as elitism or even as specifically Jewish, but his description of the ethical relation does arise from his experience, which can be properly described as the experience of a Jewish European struggling with the pervasive anti-Semitism of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Let us first deal with the possibility that Levinas has, contrary to the demands of the reduction, allowed his Judaic tradition to inform his phenomenology. Then we will respond to Hering's warning about whether or not Levinas has confused an eidetic description of the ethical relation with the particular Jewish experience. Finally, we will address whether or not religious language in general is a proper "improper" language to employ for phenomenological descriptions, specifically whether "God" operates as a divine imposition or a proper metaphor for that which can only be described metaphorically.

### **Levinas in Cultural, Religious Context**

Emmanuel Levinas begins "Signature," a short article meant to encapsulate the themes of his work, with a highly shortened version of his autobiography. Places, events, and figures that one might expect from a twentieth century phenomenologist are readily apparent, but at the beginning of the autobiography and at the end, Levinas makes reference to his Judaic background beginning with, "The Hebraic bible from the earliest years in Lithuania . . ." and ending with "dominated by the presentiment and the memory of the Nazi horror."<sup>127</sup> Those familiar with his philosophical works will readily recognize Biblical allusions and references to God; however, this does not mean that Levinas's Judaism is informing upon his philosophy any more than allusions to Captain Ahab or a white whale would indicate a surreptitious attempt to impose a whaling background on an investigation. Suspicions about any real crossover between the Judaic and the

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<sup>127</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, "Signature," trans. Mary Ellen Petrisko, ed. Adriaan Peperzak, Research in Phenomenology, vol. 8, 1978, 175.

philosophical are further heightened by Levinas's own assertions that when he is doing something philosophical, it is not to be taken as anything religious. Then why should I make any certain claims about Levinas's Judaism in his philosophy? Perhaps the history of philosophy has taught that what a philosopher claims to be doing and what he is actually doing are not always the same. Not until much later did Levinas actually admit that his religion was involved:

I have never explicitly intended to "accord" or to "reconcile" the two [viz. the biblical and the philosophical] traditions. If they are in fact in agreement, this is probably due to the fact that all philosophical thought rests on pre-philosophical experiences and that the readings of the Bible belonged in my case to these fundamental experiences. The Bible has therefore played an essential role in my philosophical way of thought - for the most part, however, without my being conscious of it.<sup>128</sup>

Let us take a moment to uncover Levinas's "fundamental experiences" which concern the Bible and Jewish tradition. Emmanuel Levinas's Jewish development went through three distinct stages.<sup>129</sup> In 1906, Levinas was born in Lithuania into a Jewish family and community where "to be Jewish was as natural as having eyes and ears."<sup>130</sup> While the family spoke Russian, the first language he learned to read was Hebrew, and when his family returned to Kovno in 1920, Levinas enrolled in the Hebrew *Gymnasium* as part of his formal education. Once he left for the University of Strasbourg in 1923,

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<sup>128</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, Ethics and Infinity, trans. Richard Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 24.

<sup>129</sup> Annette Aronowicz marks Levinas's religious journey in her introduction to the Nine Talmudic Readings. I have taken her introduction and distilled out what I consider to be the three most important influences on Levinas. For a much richer development see her introduction in: Nine Talmudic Readings, trans. Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), ix - xxxix.

<sup>130</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, "Interview with Myriam Anissimov," in Is it Righteous to Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas, ed. Jill Robbins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 84.

Levinas's connection to his Jewish roots often gets overlooked in biographies in favor of the philosophical traditions that begin to take hold, and it is not unfair to note that there is little evidence to suggest that Levinas spent time in contact with Jewish texts during the late 1920's and 1930's.

Nevertheless, after only a short while in France in the early 30's, Levinas joined the Alliance Israélite Universelle established in France by prominent Jews in French culture. While Levinas did not necessarily agree wholeheartedly with the Alliance's desire to integrate, he did find the values at the root of integration to be worthwhile. Integration assumes a unity of humankind that nationalist Jews would deny. The obvious conflict awaiting the Alliance was, of course, the fascism of the 1930's, which placed an onus upon Jews to admit their difference and be noticed as a group apart from mainstream European culture. Levinas responded to this cultural imposition by turning his attention to giving an essential definition for Judaism and describing the implications making such a definition would have for the Alliance and European Jews. The position at which he arrives simultaneously takes into account his own seminal thinking on the situation of ethics and the essence and efficacy of Jewish wisdom. Jewish wisdom, Levinas claims, as opposed to the Western tradition, is different in that while it focuses upon the "formation and expression of the universal" it is an expression of the universal "insofar as it unites persons without reducing them to an abstraction in which the oneness of their uniqueness is sacrificed to the genus; of the universal in which oneness has already been approached in love."<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, "From Ethics to Exegesis," in In the Time of the Nations, trans. Michael B. Smith (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 109.

The third important development in Levinas's Judaism dates from 1947 to 1951 with his study under the enigmatic Chouchani, who taught within a small, select circle, often without introducing one student to another. Both Eli Wiesel and Levinas studied with Chouchani, but neither had any idea of the other's tutelage. Chouchani impressed upon Levinas that any rediscovery of what Judaism was must go through the traditional texts of the religion, specifically the Talmud. Such an influence inspired Levinas to place greater emphasis upon the Hebrew language, doing his own translations rather than relying on others, as well as taking up teaching the Talmud at the *École Normale Israélite Orientale*, a school established by the Alliance of which Levinas was the director.

Levinas personally admits that his life has never been without participation in the Jewish community, and having seen evidence of his level of commitment, we are forced to admit that Janicaud has a right to his suspicions concerning Levinas's attachment to Judaism and the possibility of, if not a conscious inclusion in his philosophy, a subconscious seeping through of the Judaic tradition.<sup>132</sup> It will be helpful, now, in the face of Levinas's early denial and later admission of religious influence that we look directly at those concepts which most seem to attach him to problematic religious involvement.

### **The Greek and the Hebrew**

First and foremost, Levinas appears to rely upon Judaism as the proper counter-balance or remedy for the Western Philosophical tradition. It is important to note,

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<sup>132</sup> Annette Aronowicz makes the point that Levinas denies having any "return" to Judaism in his life, since he feels as though he was never absent from the community and traditions of his religion. This is in direct contrast to some writers who make more of the fact that Levinas does not deal specifically with Jewish texts during his formative, phenomenological years.

however, that Levinas chooses to contrast the Hebrew to the Greek rather than Judaism to philosophy. Therefore, in order to have a foundation against which to understand the Hebrew, let us first define, in brief, the easier term: Greek. Greek is the easier of the two because Greek is the language of philosophy. It is the language of what is; therefore, it is not a problem for reason to ask the question: What is Greek? Greek is that defining characteristic that guides Western Philosophy in the traditional understanding of its own history. Adriaan Peperzak's gloss on this is most important. When Levinas considers Western Philosophy, he considers it as it is defined by the average French academic. Levinas is certainly aware of philosophers within the tradition that do not fit into his definition. This is not a problem, for, in Levinas's critique, Western Philosophy acts more as a foil for his consideration of the "other" and the "ethical" than it does as a rigorous attempt to define the tradition.<sup>133</sup> With a more scrupulous inspection, an intent student of philosophy would probably see the limitations of the traditional understanding; nevertheless, it remains traditional because philosophers try to keep the overall picture simple, interpreting its heritage with a well worn template.

Levinas defines this Greek template as "economy." Following the etymology explicitly, the Greek economy represents the rule of the home where the home in philosophical terms represents the Ego. The Ego, here, denotes the privileging of the theoretical aspect of existence which ultimately engenders objectification, technology, totality and exploitation. The Greek, then, signifies the subject's going out and return, the inquiry that begins from where one is, investigates, and returns from the quest only to integrate what was found into the structure of the home. Metaphorically, Levinas refers

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<sup>133</sup> For elaboration, see Adriaan Peperzak, "Emmanuel Levinas: Jewish Experience and Philosophy," Philosophy Today, vol. 27, no. 4, 1983, 297-306.

to this return of philosophy to itself, to home, as the journey of Odysseus who fought to regain his house, his wife, and his rule. In these terms, it is not hard to see why Levinas also aligns the Greek tradition with the unethical, for constant assimilation never allows the other, the goal of the quest, to remain as other. The return always subsumes the other's identity into the home of the Ego.<sup>134</sup>

In contrast to the Greek, Levinas poses Hebrew. Gibbs describes Hebrew as a "way of thought" or a "kind of reasoning prior to Greek" that opposes the Greek economy;<sup>135</sup> however, this cannot be the case. "Thought" and "reasoning" are themselves elements of the realm of the Greek. Hebrew must be something else, something other, a non-theoretical experience of the self in the world that cannot be reduced to any theoretical explanation. Just as Odysseus metaphorically describes the way of thought for the philosophical, Levinas compares his new "first philosophy" of ethics to the story of Abraham: "To the myth of Odysseus returning to Ithaca, we wish to oppose the story of Abraham, leaving his fatherland forever for a land yet unknown and

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<sup>134</sup> Given this understanding of the Greek, it is little wonder that Heidegger becomes one of Levinas's favorite targets for critique. Levinas dedicates an entire section of Totality and Infinity to the partial refutation and correction of Heidegger's analysis of "being-in-the-world," which amounts to little more than being at home for Levinas. "Interiority and Economy" finds that love of life, not *Sorge*, constitutes the nature of egoic existence; however, Levinas goes on to claim that this is not the fundamental mode of the self.

<sup>135</sup> Gibbs' analysis of the Greek and Hebrew in Levinas is both in depth and insightful; nevertheless, he falls victim to the very problem Levinas is trying so desperately to avoid, allowing the Hebrew to not only be translated into but to be overtaken by the Greek. The fact that some sort of translation can occur suggests a connection between the two terms, but Levinas does not want to suggest that one is in fact a greater genus of the other such that a reduction from one to the other is possible. Gibbs' declaration that the Hebrew is a kind of "reasoning" places Hebrew within the categorical metaphysics of the Greek, effectively asserting just such a reduction. For his analyses see: Robert Gibbs, Correlations in Rosenzweig and Levinas (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

forbidding his servant to bring even his son to the point of departure.”<sup>136</sup> The journey of Abraham involves a departure without return, a promise that his clan would never return. Should we be worried, now, that having spoken of this story, i.e., put it into Greek, that the essential Hebrew has been lost? Later in the same article in which Levinas makes this comparison between Abraham and Odysseus, Levinas explains that “the work thought to the limit demands a radical generosity of the Same, which in the Work goes toward the Other. It therefore demands an *ingratitude* of the Other. Gratitude would be precisely the *return* of the movement to its origin.”<sup>137</sup> The Hebrew experience is one of giving without return, with the expectation of ingratitude, the dissolution of a balanced economy. The story of Abraham, “thought to the limit,” holds meanings upon meanings and, in some sense, never stops teaching or giving. Consequently, Levinas’s relating of the story does not contradict or undermine the essential nature of its going out. The reader can never add to the story; the story always adds to the reader. The giving in the text cannot be returned.<sup>138</sup> Having assigned this reading to the Hebrew, let us not beg the question, if this is the Hebrew according to Levinas, is it truly Jewish?

To label a certain thought as essentially Jewish may be problematic. Are there no other religions that offer the same kind of ethics to be “for the other” with no expectation of return? Levinas periodically quotes from the New Testament of the Christian Bible

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<sup>136</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “The Trace of the Other,” in Deconstruction in Context, trans. A. Lingis, ed. Mark Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 348.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Jill Robbins has an excellent treatment of these two stories and also keeps in mind the otherness of the Hebrew which Levinas tries to maintain in her essay “Alterity and the Judaic: Reading Levinas,” in Prodigal Son, Elder Brother (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 100 - 132.



verses from the Gospel of Matthew: “Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison? . . . Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me.” Perhaps we might quote from the Epistle of James which echoes its Jewish roots in the nascence of Christianity: “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.” Surely there are other traditions which Levinas might have suggested.

Levinas still critiques the Christian tradition, however, as having succumbed to the influence of the Greek: “Christianity too is tempted by temptation, and in this it is profoundly Western.”<sup>139</sup> What Levinas means here is that Christianity sees itself caught in struggle with the tempter; Christians see themselves caught in struggle with temptations, and as Nietzsche and Hegel correctly surmised, this corporate and individual conflict acts as a high motivator for Christians to evolve in the world, constantly overcoming new challenges, conquering and assimilating. It is not necessarily the case that Christianity is unethical or without a sense of the other in its tradition, but since Levinas sees the history of Christianity expressed in Europe culminating in a tacit compliance with Fascism, the tradition fails to offer, for Levinas, a proper model or language for ethics.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “The Temptation of Temptation,” in Nine Talmudic Readings, trans. Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 33.

<sup>140</sup> Let us note here that Levinas is not attempting to offer a definition of Christianity in order to dismiss it as unethical. The Christian mission historically proselytizes, bringing others into conformity with Christian views, endeavoring to create a totality which Levinas opposes. This does not mean that Levinas is against Christianity nor does it mean that he does not see instances where Christianity and Judaism can be in a mutually positive relationship. E.g. Levinas writes in Difficult Freedom, “Judaean-Christian Friendship,” of an experience at the fourth Colloquium of French-speaking Jewish

Rosenzweig, a heavy influence on Levinas, predates Levinas's understanding of Christianity and gives credence to the idea that even as some Jews were trying to offer apologetics that would stem the anti-Semite sentiment and would allow them to pass unrestricted in European culture, there was a blooming awareness of essential differences between Judaism and the entrenched European Christianity. In the third and final section of the Star of Redemption, Rosenzweig offers a sociological view of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. For him, Protestantism proudly takes its place as the highest realization of Hegel's culture growing in perfection turning its desire for brotherhood into a desire for winning converts via evangelism or conquest. Christianity, then, for Levinas and Rosenzweig is a religion tied to history and progress, reaching its logical end through secularization and loss of the divine, meaning that the end will be when the world becomes Christian, erasing the division between the heavenly and the earthly.<sup>141</sup>

Would Levinas go so far as to say that the only true ethics is one grounded in the Jewish, which seems the only belief that is founded upon the Hebrew? It seems as though he would, but the issue at heart is one of language rather than ontology. In fact, what Levinas is claiming about the essential "Jewishness" of all humankind as one relates to another on the foundation of the ethical is that all human beings originate under similar situational structurings such that the ethical is always already there, and Judaism, for Levinas, provides a tradition which can rightly describe this origination. Other religions

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Intellectuals where Jacques Madaule "shows Christians that we (Jews) are significant to the future and to life. This significance can transform the very meaning of Judaeo-Christian relations." Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism, trans. Sean Hand (London: The Athalone Press, 1990).

<sup>141</sup> For a review of Rosenzweig's understanding of Christianity, see Mark Lilla, "A Battle for Religion," in The New York Review of Books Vol. 49, No. 19, December 5, 2002. On-line at <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/15888>.

or disciplines which have also embraced ethics still fall short as a proper model for Levinas's philosophy because they are "tempted by temptation," wrapped up in the philosophy of assimilation, of the expectation of a return for their work. Here we see the outcome of the dilemma Levinas faced as a member of the Jewish Alliance, who believed in a humanity common to all, and as a marginalized Jew in Europe was forced to define what makes Judaism essentially different from the actions and ethics of a society ready to marginalize and control. The proper ethical nature found in Judaism is not, then, specifically Jewish but is the properly human, the properly ethical, acting in Judaism. "Judaism" and "Hebrew" become concrete names that disclose a universal, ethical nature.

The philosophical arrogance of the modern period is dying, and philosophy is coming to accept that it can no longer justify its own history.<sup>142</sup> Western philosophy, as a historically situated endeavor in itself, cannot claim mastery over all experience, and in the sense of western philosophy with which Levinas is concerned, the context is even more constricted. When he claims to "speak in Greek," he means the "customary mode of presentation and interpretation in the universities," a mode which "owes much to the Greeks."<sup>143</sup> Levinas's implicit Judaism, that which he himself claimed to be replete in his work "subconsciously," allows a move away from the totalizing forces of the "Greek."

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<sup>142</sup> The idea here is that Western philosophy is historically contextualized by politics, philosophical discoveries, religious movements, and scientific advancements. Consequently, philosophy in the West must be seen as delimited by this context and not free to define itself as though it were not contextually restricted. While the concept of the West as a concept is coming under scrutiny, Philippe Nemo offers an excellent work that acknowledges the role of the Greeks, Romans, Christians, and democratic revolutions as contributors of recognizable Western culture. Philippe Nemo, What is the West, trans. Kenneth Casler (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2005).

<sup>143</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, "On Jewish Philosophy," in In the Time of the Nations, trans. Michael B. Smith (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994) p. 173.

In one sense, then, we have already answered part of Janicaud's critique. Levinas's understanding of the ethics implicit in Judaism is not, as we have it so far, an insidious infecting of the phenomenological *epochè*, but is a way of defining the lived experience of the intersubjective in a manner not constricted by the habitual practices of the universities, the very experience phenomenology is intended to investigate, an experience Levinas defines as "Hebraic."

While we have yet to completely satisfy Janicaud's objections, we are at a point to bring up Hering's warnings about a pseudo-phenomenological literature that confuses the eidetic with the empirical. Levinas's use of "Hebrew" and "Judaic" as linguistic intrusions meant to unseat the expected "Greek" descriptive language do not refer to something specifically religious, but to an eidetic that is universally descriptive of humanity. We have not, as yet, investigated the appropriateness of Levinas's description of the ethical, but we can, with assurance, argue that his description is not an attempt to apply a singular Jewish eidetic to extra-Jewish instances of the intersubjective. Judaism offers, in its history, stories and experiences, an indication of the ethical *eidōs* Levinas argues is constitutive of all human interaction. Janicaud, however, still holds sway with his critique that nothing has been done to show that Levinas does not reach an understanding of this *eidōs* without reliance upon the tenants and tradition of Judaism.

Having settled Hering's warning, we must now uncover the Jewish resources that shaped Levinas's Hebrew in another concession to Janicaud's attack. If Levinas is to keep the Judaic tradition properly bracketed, then he cannot allow his phenomenology to be overrun with the expectations and presuppositions presented in the classic Jewish texts, which he freely addresses in his work.

## Levinas and Hebrew Texts

The first evidence of a truly Jewish tradition in Levinas's background has already been noted in his initial education centered on the Hebrew Bible, but under the influence of Chouchani, Levinas would also make the interpretive texts of the Talmud foundational to his understanding of the role of the Jewish in history. For Levinas, the Bible is the "Book of books."<sup>144</sup> What makes it so "is that extraordinary presence of its characters, that ethical plenitude and its mysterious possibilities of exegesis which originally signified transcendence for me."<sup>145</sup> Levinas's confession concerning the Bible illuminates a central concern of his that will be important for the rest of this chapter. The Bible's overabundance of possibilities represented transcendence for him. As Levinas attempts to show God (a.k.a. the infinite in philosophical parlance) as the constitutive element of the ethical encounter, his later descriptions of the way in which the infinite can be found in the finite will all be modeled after this original sense of the transcendent infinite, which is the limit of the mysterious possibilities in the Bible.

While the Bible represents the irruption of the infinite in the finite text, the Talmudic texts helped Levinas to rediscover the specific theme and place of Judaism in the world. Chouchani's contribution to Levinas's work was a renewed interest in the Talmud, which, for Levinas, brings to light Israel as the model of ethical behavior. As we will see argued, human beings originate in the ethical condition of the infinite, but it is the interpretation of the Rabbis that bring this condition to light in its truly Jewish frame. I will, for the most part, avoid the Talmudic readings simply because Levinas's

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<sup>144</sup> Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 23.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*

hermeneutic approach involves “translating” the Hebrew of the Talmud into Greek, and our interest here is Levinas’s roots in the Hebrew.

Levinas’s other sources for his formulation of the Hebrew come from other Jewish thinkers, most specifically Franz Rosenzweig and through Rosenzweig, Hermann Cohen. One may object that Cohen is much more notable as a neo-Kantian and should not be considered as a “Jewish” thinker. While Rosenzweig writes obscurely for a strictly Jewish audience, he was also a student of Cohen’s and can easily be related to other philosophers.<sup>146</sup> Consequently, to consider these figures as part of Levinas’s Jewish background would seem paradoxical if we were attempting to draw a hard and fast distinction between the Judaic and the philosophical. However, because our distinction is between Hebrew and Greek, we can consider these thinkers as Jewish insofar as they have some religious affiliation in their work and contribute to the theme of the Hebrew. Having made the distinction between the Hebrew and the Greek, I will investigate how the Bible, Cohen and Rosenzweig contribute to the irruption of the infinite, as one would say in Greek, or as one would say in the Hebrew, the possibility of revelation.

From Levinas’s early philosophy in Totality and Infinity, he has relied upon Exodus chapter 33 wherein Moses is said to meet God face to face to illustrate the manner in which God reveals Himself *without* His presence.<sup>147</sup> The central verse (11) in

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<sup>146</sup>As adamantly as Levinas desires to be known as a philosopher for the world, Rosenzweig desires to be known as a thinker for the Jews. Nevertheless, Robert Gibbs argues convincingly that we should also understand Rosenzweig as a very capable philosopher. Aligning Rosenzweig with philosophy, however, places him squarely in the same paradox as Cohen as to whether we can legitimately consider Rosenzweig as part of the Jewish influence. Again, see Gibbs, Correlations in Rosenzweig and Levinas.

<sup>147</sup>For excellent commentary on the often overlooked importance and meaning of Biblical passages in Levinas, see Martin Srajek, In the Margins of Deconstruction: Jewish

the passage reads, “And God spoke to Moses face to face like a man speaks to his friend.” Face to face often represents a presence of one face in front of another; however, the simile in the verse that compares this relationship to the way one might speak to a friend places the actual presence in doubt. This should strike even the occasional reader of scripture as expected, since Biblical authors continually avoid picturing God in a position of inferiority or even equality.<sup>148</sup> The text reveals that the face to face is not a true presence of God before Moses when we read Moses’ question at verse 13 for God to “let me know thy ways.” The nature of God, then, is not revealed to Moses, but remains hidden. However, Moses’ second and final request, that God show His Glory (v.18), is granted, but Moses does not get the front row seats he might have desired. As God passes, Moses is pushed into a cleft in the rock so that he cannot see the Lord pass.

God’s face, then, never truly appears, but is always deferred in God’s passing. The importance for Levinas from this passage is the nature of God’s absence even in what should be the most intimate of forums - the face to face conversation. What follows the conversation, after Moses comes down from the mountain and confronts the nation of Israel, symbolizes the nature of the infinite in the human. Even while pressed into the rock face, Moses was still privy to the revealed glory of God, and this glory radiates from him (Ex. 34:29-35). This glory radiates God’s demand for His people to repent of their

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Conceptions of Ethics in Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2000), 90 - 129.

<sup>148</sup> Friendship may sound like a relationship of equality, but it need not be. The avoidance of showing God in an equal or inferior manner led the Masoretes to edit the meeting between Abraham and God during the bargaining session over the number of righteous men in Sodom needed for God to spare the city. Some ancient traditions read at Genesis 18:22 that “the Lord remained standing before Abraham,” as though God were to wait upon Abraham. The Masoretes edited in favor of “Abraham remained standing before the Lord.” God’s superiority is constantly affirmed.

unfaithfulness, return to their God and do what is right in His sight. After Moses's meetings, though, his practice was to place a veil over his face to obscure the beaming light of the infinite. While interpreting the nature of this veil is open, whether literal or metaphorical, Levinas may indeed want to read the veil as Moses's actual face. The infinite, the light of God's glory, shines from behind the face of every human being as the demand to do what is right, but just as the glory of God passed while Moses's back was turned, the infinite does not show even in the face of those who confront us.<sup>149</sup>

If the face of God does not show, then how do we recognize God in the finite world in which we live? How does the revelation of God happen? For the Biblical answer to this, we must turn to the figure of the prophet Ezekiel. Ezekiel becomes for Levinas a figure of influence in his later works, "God and Philosophy" and Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence. While he never treats it as explicitly as he does the passage from Exodus, a careful reading of the prophet's confrontation with God in the opening chapters of Ezekiel's book lays bare the resonance within Levinas's work. Even though Ezekiel's reluctance to be God's prophet demonstrates the possibility of a subjectivity that resists the demand, we will concentrate on Ezekiel 3: 1-3 wherein God's chosen eats the text of God's word and becomes the divine mouthpiece. Despite resistance, God at least puts His word into Ezekiel by making the chosen prophet eat a

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<sup>149</sup> The place of a passage like the one we have just finished exegeting in Levinasian fashion does not necessarily reflect the way that Biblical scholars might approach the text. The face as a philosophical principle in Levinas is not presented as such in the Bible; nevertheless Levinas would respond: "In my opinion that is the spirit of the Bible, with all its concern for weakness, all the obligation towards the weak. But I didn't find that in a verse. You see my terminology does not come from the Bible. Otherwise it would be the Bible to the very end." See, Tamra Wright, Peter Hughes, Alison Ainley, "The Paradox of Morality: An Interview with Emmanuel Levinas," in The Provocation of Levinas, ed. Robert Bernasconi and David Wood (London: Routledge, 1988), 173.



scroll. The text, here, represents the medium by which God must enter the finite world, but simply reading what God has written is obviously insufficient. Ezekiel becomes, then, for Levinas, the portraiture of the infinite as part of the human origination, for the eaten text sustains in a way that the read word cannot.<sup>150</sup>

The depiction of a medium at which God's passing may be hinted demonstrates the need for subjectivity to be radically reconceived. The origin of the human can no longer be defined in terms of one's self but must now, by being de-centered, thrust into and out from this medium of God's passing, find the sustenance of self in the infinite that is our true origin. The medium for mankind, however, is not the text, but the face, and once again, Levinas finds Ezekiel to be a model figure. After Ezekiel consumed the word of God, making God's demands part of him, Ezekiel prophesies to the people, but this seems strange after Ezekiel's reluctance in the face of God's awesome persuasion in chapters one and two. In 3:12-27, though, God ends Ezekiel's isolation and places His prophet among the people. Ezekiel only adheres to God's demand once his attention moves from God to the nation. For Levinas, this epitomizes the way the subject has a vertical relationship with the creator for it is only through our ethical interaction with others following our divine origin that we achieve a relation with God.

No one can defend Levinas from the claim that he makes explicit reference to religious texts. Reading any of his works, philosophical or otherwise, reveals numerous quotations, but Levinas himself is aware of the criticism these citations will bring and

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<sup>150</sup> The text, here, has important ramifications for Levinas's understanding of Judaism, for it is through the rituals that have defined Jewish life that the presence of God is *indicated*. God is always pointed to via the medium of scripture, and just as scripture defines the medium that makes the Jewish nation a nation so does the infinite as mediated by the face act as origin of what it is to be human.

seriously asks, “Am I citing the Bible, or am I doing phenomenology.”<sup>151</sup> If he means for the Bible to lend credence to his argument by adding the weight of an uncontested authority, then one of the basic tenets of phenomenology has been violated.

Phenomenology is a method of description that begins with observing where one is and the experiences had by simply being there. The phenomenologist describing his experience, however, must not make reference to any presuppositions. Uncovering the conditions of the experience without reference to preconceived notions is the goal and major difficulty of phenomenology. The Bible, or theological tradition, cited as an authority would constitute such presuppositions and would, therefore, be out of play.<sup>152</sup> Levinas, though, does not reference the Bible as indisputable; rather, the Bible represents revealing stories of humanity, descriptions of ethical encounters. As a result, Levinas responds to his own question that the real concern is “to know if this reference to the Bible falsifies phenomenology.”<sup>153</sup> Considering the Bible without grounding it in supernatural origins opens it up as a descriptive text like any other, as examples for phenomenology.

In addition to the many examples of Biblical texts in Levinas’s philosophy, we may also locate him within the Jewish mystical tradition. Claiming such a correlation is doubly dubious considering Levinas’s own admonition that his philosophy should be distinguished from seeking the *unio mystica*. Levinas asserts that the transcendent infinite that he discloses in his phenomenology should not be confused with the manner

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<sup>151</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, Autrement que savoir (Paris: Editions Osiris, 1988), 74.

<sup>152</sup> When Janicaud makes his critique, he refers to Husserl’s Ideas I §58, as did we at footnote 1, where Husserl places the transcendence of God outside the reduced subject.

<sup>153</sup> Levinas, Autrement que savoir, 80.

in which mysticism employs transcendence and subsequent contact with it: “[The Infinite] is not the numinous: the I who approaches him is neither annihilated on contact nor transported outside of itself, but remains separated and keeps its *as-for-me*.”<sup>154</sup> This characterization of mysticism assumes that the *unio mystica* results in a totality, and totality is the very thing that negates the possibility of transcendence. Mysticism either joins the seeker and God together such that the seeker loses all identity in a totality made by God or the seeker creates a totality that is capable of encompassing God.

The problem with Levinas’s criticism is that its target is only one form of Jewish mysticism, specifically Hasidic, whereas he makes it appear as though all mysticism is at fault. In pre-Hasidic texts, the term *devekut* (cleaving) most often describes man’s intimate relationship with God, which connotes a relationship between two identifiable participants; however, Hasidic Judaism typically employs the term *yichud* (union) which certainly implies the very annihilation of which Levinas is critical. Gershom Scholem agrees that very few kabbalists actually intended a communion with God to destroy individuality.<sup>155</sup> The desired outcome was an apprehension of God and creation which could not be achieved via the intellect. If non-theoretical apprehension of God does rightly describe the earlier segment of Jewish mysticism, then Levinas will appear to have a strong affinity with it.<sup>156</sup> In fact, Richard Cohen, while questioning congruence

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<sup>154</sup> Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 77.

<sup>155</sup> Gershom Scholem, Kabbalah (New York: New American Library, 1974), 3.

<sup>156</sup> I find it impossible not to interject with at least an allusion to a story. Hagigah 14b details one of the oldest Jewish mystical stories of four men who entered the *pardes*. Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma, Aher, and Rabbi Avika entered the *pardes* but only Rabbi Avika endured unscathed. What allows our hero to survive is his refusal to give up his separate identity.

between Levinas and mysticism on the grounds put forward by Levinas, unequivocally admits “that both Rosenzweig and Levinas are not merely aware in some vague way of a Jewish mystical tradition, but diversely refer and allude to Jewish mystical sources,” and that while “both thinkers explicitly deny the label ‘mystic’ . . . affirmative or negative avowals are of little account.”<sup>157</sup>

With Cohen’s admission in mind, we can briefly show how Levinas does in fact resemble a strand of Jewish mysticism represented here by Abraham Abulafia and Isaac Luria.<sup>158</sup> What Levinas shares with the former is the idea of rupture, the only action that would allow a truly transcendent being to be encountered by finite humanity. Rupture, the breaking in of the transcendent upon the world of the human being, involves two other concepts central to Levinas. On the one hand, God remains infinitely separated, a being without being - “neither a body nor will He ever be corporealized”<sup>159</sup> - and on the other hand, the union between God and human occurs within and through the world itself. If, however, man must go through the entire world to draw close to God, then man and God are at the greatest possible distance, but “the abundance of *mitsvot*” exists for the one who knows the reality of the Torah, and this brings God near.<sup>160</sup> At this moment, we must shift our brief tryst with mysticism to Isaac Luria, for while Abulafia occasionally

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<sup>157</sup> Richard Cohen, “The Face of Truth and Jewish Mysticism,” in Elevations: The Height of the Good in Rosenzweig and Levinas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 251-252.

<sup>158</sup> For my discussion of these two mystics, I am relying upon the work done by Oona Ajzenstat in her work, Driven Back to the Text (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2001), 150-200.

<sup>159</sup> Moshe Idel, The Mystical Experience of Abraham Abulafia, trans. Jonathon Chipman (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988), 90.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

suggests the bridge of ethics, Luria proclaims it boldly. What Levinas found in Abulafia was deepened and expounded in Luria.<sup>161</sup> The most important advance, of course, is the importance Luria placed upon ethics. Luria describes a desire for union with God in much the same way that Levinas describes desire in Totality and Infinity. This desire instructs or demands responsible actions.

### **The Influence of Jewish Philosophers**

The features of God's constitutiveness in humans and the moral relation that makes an approach to God possible also appears in the philosophical works of Hermann Cohen. Levinas rarely addresses Cohen, and the relationship between them is usually mediated by way of Rosenzweig, Cohen's student.<sup>162</sup> However, Rosenzweig is not always a faithful student, so Levinas's affinities with Cohen, while sometimes simple correlations, suggest ties beyond fortunate parallels. Cohen's approach to the infinite God and His relation to the finite find an unmistakable resonance in Levinas. Consider the following quote from Cohen's Religion:

This looking toward God can mean nothing other than looking towards the solution of the infinite task, a solution which, though it is infinite, nonetheless actualizes itself. The solution is infinite, for it is only a moment in the infinite task; but the solution at this moment signifies infinite success, the infinite result.

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<sup>161</sup> An overly brief synopsis of some of the congruent themes would entail the separation of the infinite from the finite by way of contraction, a contraction which makes the finite possible. This contraction is the necessary condition for the transcendence of the infinite. Finite beings relate to the infinite, and this relationship constitutes a redemption of creation and the diminution of contraction. See Ajzenstat, Driven, 178-179.

<sup>162</sup> One of the earliest dealings with the relation between Levinas and Cohen comes from Edith Wyschogrod, "The Moral Self: Emmanuel Levinas and Hermann Cohen," Daat: A Journal of Philosophy, vol. 4, 1980, 35 - 58. While she recognizes the differences between the two thinkers, she argues that what binds them together is their understanding of the role of the infinite, which is our focus here. For both Cohen and Levinas, she states, the infinite is that which provides "the open-endedness of the moral realm which gives the self its meaning" (58).

God can assign no task that would be a labor of Sisyphus. Self-sanctification must arrive at its infinite conclusion in the forgiveness of sin by God.<sup>163</sup>

The relationship between humans and God takes the form of an “infinite task,” for Cohen, a task that can never be completed, much like a line approaching an asymptote on a graph. One might suspect that the promise of an unending work would paralyze those looking at the daunting task. Cohen, on the other hand, believes that the infinite nature of the approach guarantees the continual striving for an ethical community, which already hints at a connection between the infinite God and moral praxis. Striving in relation to the infinite is, for Cohen, the move of one becoming holy, which is the developing of the spirit of knowledge into the spirit of action.

For Levinas, Cohen’s infinite task would accurately describe the relation one has with the other, a demand that is never met, but for Levinas, the imposition of the other does not cause the self to wither under an impossible load. Rather, the imposition signals the infinite in the ethical task ahead, and the relation one has with the infinite is Desire.<sup>164</sup> Cohen, then, provides another figure for Levinas who finds the relation with God both to be infinite and to require the seeking after God in moral terms. However, there does seem to be incongruence in the fact that Cohen believes that we move from knowledge to praxis. While this will remain a stumbling block for complete

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<sup>163</sup> Hermann Cohen, Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism, trans. Simon Kaplan (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Company, 1971), 207.

<sup>164</sup> Here we get our first reference to the one example harped on by Janicaud. Desire is the feeling, motivator, and catalyst for a relation with the infinite that overcomes any personal doubts as to the impossibility of accomplishing the task. The question to be asked is, is this desire so tied with the notion of God in Judaism that it is not free to be properly descriptive of the ethical experience?

correspondence, Cohen's further explanation of what happens in this move reduces the friction between the two thinkers.

Cohen claims that the mediation between God and humans can be conceptually maintained in a pure abstraction. However, whenever one allows for any material connection between the two, the conceptual can no longer maintain the abstraction and must give way to ethical activity.

The mediation [between God and humans], however, can be thought of as correlation only conceptually. As soon as it is not confined to a strict conceptual abstraction, as soon as it is imagined as a material connection of powers, which afterwards become persons, the connection assumes the form of a community.<sup>165</sup>

Again, we have the move of holiness from the conceptual to the moral. The Shekinah, the dwelling presence of God with his people, would not be the condition for relationship between God and humans but would be the condition within which God and humans act. If Cohen has rightly interpreted the activity of humans in their relation to God as moral activity, then one cannot distinguish between a moral act and an act that brings one closer to God.

For Levinas as well, once the encounter with an "other" has occurred, the conceptual can no longer encompass God. Of course, for Levinas as well, the conceptual could never think the infinite in a way in which all its possibilities are grasped. The self is always, already for the other; we are always involved in community first. Therefore, the self is always limited in the scope of its relationship, unable to grasp the whole of the encounter from a vantage point outside. Once Cohen makes the move to community, however, he and Levinas would find much agreement. Levinas constantly asserts that

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<sup>165</sup> H. Cohen, Religion, 100.

any move toward God must be made, necessarily, through ethical moves toward the other that holds us hostage.

As we conclude just some of the influences on Levinas's philosophy that might be considered Jewish, our last figure stands as the largest, at least according to Levinas himself: "We were struck by the opposition to the idea of totality in the Star of Redemption by Franz Rosenzweig, which is too often present in this book to be cited."<sup>166</sup> What makes Rosenzweig such an important figure is the role that he plays in freeing Levinas from the totalizing grip that phenomenology, in the hands of Husserl and Heidegger, had held. The adequation between conscious thought and experience that phenomenology analyzed in intentionality totalized the world into a knowable quantity, at least according to the manner in which Husserl and Heidegger were being predominantly read during Levinas's most formative years with phenomenology. Only by his familiarity with Rosenzweig and the deepened appreciation for justice he received by reading the Star did he discover the means to break from totality.<sup>167</sup> In keeping with our theme concerning the irruption of the infinite, we will see Rosenzweig's influence in the nature of the command that issues from the other, the command as a call for redemption, and redemption as a response to the infinite in the finite world.

Rosenzweig composes the Star of Redemption in three sections, each of which are further subdivided into three sections. The second section of the Star, "The Course or The Always-Renewed Cosmos," details the interrelation of God, human, and world, and

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<sup>166</sup> Levinas, Totality and Infinity, p. 28.

<sup>167</sup> See Richard Cohen's analysis of Levinas and Rosenzweig for the significance of the Star in correcting the shortcomings that Levinas found in the phenomenologies of Husserl and Heidegger. Richard Cohen, "Levinas, Rosenzweig and the Phenomenologies of Husserl and Heidegger," in Philosophy Today, vol. 32, no. 2, Summer 1988, 165 - 178. Of course, chapter I questions the idea that phenomenology is of such a totalizing nature.



comprises the necessary correlation we wish to draw between Rosenzweig and Levinas, especially the relation between God and humans and humans and world. Rosenzweig establishes in his first section that God is separate from world, a rarely disputed orthodox claim, but this leaves the question of how humans who live in the world are supposed to know the God that is separate.<sup>168</sup> Knowing God only becomes possible if God reveals Himself.

Speech, for Rosenzweig, acts as the fundamental mode of revelation, for it is in speech that one reveals oneself beyond the trappings of actions and behavior. In speech, the element of surprise always waits to overtake us as something unexpected about the other comes to light. The specific mode of speech that accomplishes this revelation is the imperative, “Love me,” or Biblically speaking, “You shall love the Lord your God” (Deut. 6:5). What makes the imperative revelatory, though? In contrast to the imperative, the indicative states a state of affairs; the temporal frame within which it works always slips into the past. Commands, on the other hand, state what must be *now*, molding each future moment to the present state. The special status of the command to love lies in its being foundational to all others. The reason for this is that all imperatives can be turned into law without changing the nature of the order, but if this were to occur to the command to love, it would no longer have the nature of the utterance coming from a person. “Love me” does not simply implore; it places the recipient of the command into a realization of one’s failure. This failure arises from the realization that while in egoic solitude, there was an element of love upon the receiver which went unreturned. To admit of this failure is to acknowledge oneself as loved: “It confesses not the

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<sup>168</sup> Here, I am strictly using Gibbs, Correlations, chapter three as the guiding interpretation of Rosenzweig’s second section.

lovelessness of the past, rather the soul speaks: I also now love, but still in this most present moment not as much as I - know myself loved.”<sup>169</sup>

As of now, God remains hidden, but the nature of the revelatory command leads us into the redemption of the world where God is finally realized. The command to love will make possible God’s revelation, but it is carried out through the redemption of others as the condition of love forms people into a community. “Love me” must be answered as Abraham and Isaiah answered the Lord, “Here am I.” As each subject stands in relation to his neighbors, the two poles are bound together in recognition of love, a love that can only now be recognized as the love of God. The binding of people together in a community under God’s love brings about true redemption wherein people offer praise back to God for His goodness. The linguistic move here is the cohortative, “Let us praise,” but the key to this statement is in the acknowledgment that must take place of the Third person in all dialogue, God. Community is based on love that is God’s condition for humans, and acknowledging this is to bring about the world’s redemption.

Redemption always points to the future. The cohortative “Let us praise” anticipates what all gathered under God will do, not as an indicative state of affairs or as an immediate imperative, but as a portrait of what is ours to make. Nevertheless, Rosenzweig thinks that this future can be fulfilled in the present, and that the community of God can come about. When I come into contact with my neighbor, I recognize someone who is also loved, is under the command to love, and, thus, someone who shares my condition. Now the “I” has become a “we,” and through this other, I am connected to neighbors upon neighbors. The community can be completed.

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<sup>169</sup>Franz Rosenzweig, The Star of Redemption, trans. William W. Hallo (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 181.

When Levinas finished reading the Star, he was ready to make an assault on the totalizing nature of philosophy. He resonated well with God as that condition upon us that commands us to love as well as the acknowledgment of the infinite in dealing with the other, which is Rosenzweig's encounter with the neighbor. However, where Rosenzweig believed in a realized eschatology, a completed time where the future of redemption had taken place in the present, Levinas sides with Cohen's infinite task. Here at the end, we can begin to see how the Biblical and Jewish philosophical influences swirl together in Levinas's thought. The Bible provided the foundational experience of God as absent but present, the infinite that could never be part of the world but was yet in-finite. Cohen allowed for a way to express God's revelation in daily existence as an asymptotic goal that could always be striven for but never reached. Rosenzweig, perhaps the greatest influence of all, helped put together the nature of the command that holds us to others, a condition that we as human beings are always, already in. We must "love our neighbor" because God has already commanded our love be to God.

### **"God" and Phenomenological Religion**

As we have seen, Dominique Janicaud laments over the "new phenomenologists" who, he claims, are not in fact practicing phenomenology because they refer to a God that needs a theology already intact before He can be spoken of meaningfully. Answering Janicaud's challenge as it may concern Levinas's philosophy will involve knowing exactly what Levinas means when he uses the term "God" in his philosophy. Is this the God of the Hebrew Bible masquerading as a self-evident manifestation? Let us allow Levinas's work to speak for itself without any assumptions about the meanings of God or religion. What this will reveal at the very foundation of Levinas's work is his belief that

the human is grounded in the religious and in God, but God and religion will be understood in a manner far removed from their normal conception and far removed from Janicaud's criticism.

One way to answer Janicaud is to argue that he is unwilling to understand the term "God" in anything but a religious context. Levinas, who is well aware of the problems of using phenomenology to point to God declares that God is an "inadmissible abstraction . . . it is in terms of the relation with the other that I speak of God." Even more emphatically is the claim in the last sentence of the paragraph just cited: "The idea of God is an idea that cannot clarify a human situation. It is the inverse that is true."<sup>170</sup> Certainly, throughout all of his philosophy, Levinas has not been afraid to use the term "God" in his texts, but up through 1962, his use of "God" had more of a Cartesian cast rather than religious source and had the purpose of describing the relation with the other rather than anything strictly theological.<sup>171</sup> The self's relation with the other, from whom the ethical demand ensues, discloses the infinite, the absolute, the irreducible other.

The promise of an encounter with infinity appears strange in the context of a face to face relationship. What is infinite about the other person? What is "divine" about the other? Here we have Levinas's basic use of the idea of God, which, in the beginning, has Cartesian parallels. For Descartes, the cogito is a realization that demands an idea of the

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<sup>170</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, "Transcendence and Height," in Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings, ed. Adriaan Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 29.

<sup>171</sup> Along with the desire to emphasize the Cartesian connections, it is important not to overplay a relationship between Levinas and Descartes. Descartes' concept of God finds its closest and most important parallel with Levinas in terms of the idea of infinity; however, this relationship with the infinite is disclosed in the human interaction of those situated in the world.

infinite, which amounts to an idea of God. The problem with infinity is that the I is limited in such a way that it cannot grasp the concept of the infinite. Infinity, then, is radically and absolutely other, and, as a result, it remains completely separated from the I. Consequently, the relationship between the concept of infinity and infinity as an object to be rendered as idea has no similarity with a mental representation and its object. In fact, the intentionality that attempts to grasp the infinite *reaches for what cannot be embraced*, and in this way, Levinas considers it infinite. The I tries to “*think more than it thinks*.” If such a direct attempt at grasping the infinite results in being overrun by the that which is to be thought, how does the idea of the infinite, the idea of God, get into the thoughts of the I. Levinas answers, “It has been put into us . . . It is experience in the sole radical sense of the term: a relationship with the exterior, with the other, without this exteriority being able to be integrated into the same.”<sup>172</sup> That which cannot be integrated into the realm of the same, which is ruled by the ontological, must, necessarily, be from a realm outside the same or beyond being.

In Levinas’s philosophy, the other functions as that which is beyond being and is before any sense of being. God, in the aforementioned Cartesian sense, acts as a model for that which overflows the I and does not bend to integration into the same. What makes God even more of a model figure is the parallel model of the Good which appears in Plato. Levinas makes constant reference to Plato’s Republic which posits a Good beyond being. In the desire to reach for the other and respond to the ethical demand there is a hollowness that accompanies the reaching. According to Levinas, “The true desire is

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<sup>172</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity,” in Collected Philosophical Papers, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Boston: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1987), 54.

that which the desired does not satisfy, but hollows out. It is goodness.”<sup>173</sup> The Good beyond being operates in the same manner as the infinite God. As the intentionality of the I directs the self towards the other, the self becomes overrun by the ideatum of infinity, hollowed out by the Good. Both God and the Good operate rhetorically to describe the encounter between the other and the I and not to operate as objects to be understood in an ethical or ontological sense.

God, distinguished as the supreme being or creator, does not play a role in Levinas’s early philosophy – only the idea of God as illuminated by Descartes. Levinas’s first major work, Totality and Infinity, published in 1961, continues the model of God and the idea of infinity as the other. In a section titled “Transcendence and the Idea of Infinity,” Levinas reiterates the major points of “Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity”: “Infinity is not the ‘object’ of a cognition . . . but is the desirable, that which arouses Desire, that is, that which is approachable by a thought that at each instant *thinks more than it thinks*.”<sup>174</sup> Conceivably, in an extreme state of doubt, we can account for all of our ideas except for infinity, which must be put into us. Levinas clearly calls this infinity “God.” Taking infinity in this work as equal to the idea of infinity as represented by the Cartesian concept of God, Levinas explicitly makes the connection between the idea of God and the other: “Infinity is the characteristic of a transcendent being as transcendent; the infinite is the absolutely other.”<sup>175</sup> Here the absolutely other is that which contests the self’s totalizing possession, in other words, the other and its ethical demand.

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<sup>173</sup> Levinas, “Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity,” 57.

<sup>174</sup> Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 62.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

With a promise of innocence already made, at least for the early works up until 1962, let us not make our assertion lightly, for it has indeed been argued that Levinas is grounded in his Jewish background with respect to his concept of God, and not just by critics of his philosophy but also by proponents of it as well.<sup>176</sup> Richard Cohen makes this claim specifically with reference to Levinas's conception of God, asserting that "Levinas's thought is committed to the Jewish tradition, *to a properly Jewish conception of God*" (my italics).<sup>177</sup> Cohen focuses upon the latter, the "properly Jewish conception," but his argument immediately puts his claim into question. Cohen claims that Levinas is attempting to overcome the traditional dichotomy between philosophy and religion, between the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and the God of the philosophers. This is certainly true, but how is such a move proper to Judaism. Why should Levinas not affirm one over the other as Martin Buber and Leo Strauss do, both affirming the God of the Bible?<sup>178</sup> In contrast, what Levinas then goes on to do is to seek

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<sup>176</sup> Janicaud's critique is not so easily answered with reference to Descartes, even in Levinas's Totality and Infinity, for in the later section, "The Metaphysical and the Human," the use of "God" once again becomes somewhat ambiguous: "The Other is not the incarnation of God, but precisely by his face, in which he is disincarnate, is the manifestation of the height in which God is revealed. It is our relations with men, which describe a field of research hardly glimpsed at . . . that give to theological concepts the sole signification they admit of" (p. 79). It seems as though we can read this passage as saying that our theological concepts are conceived through the infinite disclosed in our relations with others, but it might also be saying nothing more than our theological concepts are built upon a humanism that need not posit the actual existence of God. Either way, Levinas seems to be re-introducing a measure of theology, where he had been careful to avoid it before.

<sup>177</sup> Richard Cohen, "God in Levinas: The Justification of Justice and Philosophy," in Elevations: The Height of the Good in Rosenzweig and Levinas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 173.

<sup>178</sup> Strauss suggests that the dualism between philosophy and religion is in fact unavoidable and cautiously sides with the God of the Bible. See Leo Strauss, "Progress or Return? The Contemporary Crisis in Western Civilization," in An Introduction to

a third, an alternative that is philosophical, but not in the philosophical tradition, “to hear a God not contaminated by Being is a human possibility no less important and no less precarious than to bring Being out of the oblivion in which it is said to have fallen in metaphysics and in onto-theology.”<sup>179</sup> What this statement suggests is that Levinas places himself in line with philosophers of the phenomenological tradition who are, in essence, overhauling philosophy from a self-imposed oblivion. Levinas’s own contribution is to hear God without Being, or to hear God from a height of absolute transcendence. Cohen is right to point to transcendence as a notion of God that fits well within Jewish tradition, but, at the same time, transcendence seems to get in the way of a God intimately involved in the history of His people, carrying on conversations with His chosen leaders, involving Himself in nature. Cohen suggests that Levinas’s description is able to preserve both transcendence and a personal God.<sup>180</sup> If this is true, then perhaps Janicaud is right, and if this “properly Jewish conception” invades Levinas’s philosophy, then it is truly not phenomenology anymore.

Levinas does, undoubtedly, stand in the Jewish tradition, even if his philosophy does not stand for the Jewish tradition as he sometimes seems to claim. Nevertheless, what I hope to show is that Levinas’s phenomenological approach and resulting

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Political Philosophy: Ten Essays by Leo Strauss, ed. Hilail Gildin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 248-310. Buber, however, strongly affirms the God of the Bible by invoking a simple line from Pascal, “God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob - not of the philosophers and scholars.” Martin Buber, “The Love of God and the Idea of Deity” (1943), trans. I. M. Lask, in The Eclipse of God: Studies in the Relation Between Religion and Philosophy (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 49.

<sup>179</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1981), xlii.

<sup>180</sup> Levinas rarely suggests God as personal but does describe Him as such in “Loving the Torah more than God,” in Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism: Essays on Judaism, trans. Sean Hand (London: The Athlone Press, 1990), 145.



“phenomenological religion” grounds his claims in experience without needing or relying upon the support of an existing theological tradition. In addition, I will also argue that Levinas’s philosophy cannot be considered, in any way, theological.

Where is “there” for Levinas’s phenomenological analysis? What experience is central to his description? While some might argue that Levinas is a philosopher of alterity, his true focus has always been the experience of the subject. He defines the living self as “the being whose existing consists in identifying itself, in recovering its identity throughout all that happens to it . . . the primordial work of identification. The I is identical in its very alterations.”<sup>181</sup> What this means is that the subject is always about the task of constructing itself from what it finds in the world, narcissistically recovering the self in the face of difference. Objects and beings which might be considered as other than the self are comprehended by the self and used in self-identification, effectively negating the otherness of those objects. Levinas consistently characterizes this negation, the grasping of objects in knowledge, as an act of violence. The self “carries out an act of violence and negation . . . without disappearing, beings are in my power. The partial negation which is violence denies the independence of beings: they are mine.”<sup>182</sup> Consciousness, in its theoretical grasping and negating of otherness, creates a totality for itself. After this description, however, Levinas puts the self-identity of the subject in question and asks if it is not possible for there to be a relation between self and otherness that does not come under the power of the narcissistic I (eye).

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<sup>181</sup> Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 36.

<sup>182</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “Is Ontology Fundamental?” Entre Nous, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 9.

Evidence for this pre-conscious relation arises in the advent of the other person. As the self appropriates things, categorizing and comprehending them, there is no sense that these things in the world are not there for one's use - as Heidegger would claim - or there for consumption - as Levinas claims, going a step beyond Heidegger. However, when another person approaches and meets face to face with that consuming self, there is a sense in which no amount of conscious theorizing can encompass the other person. The other reveals the limits of consciousness and puts into question the right of the self to its self-identity. Levinas asserts: "To approach the other is to put into question my freedom, my spontaneity as a living being, my emprise over the things, this impetuosity of the current to which everything is permitted, even murder . . . the face in which the other is produced submits my freedom to judgment."<sup>183</sup> This otherness of the person signified by the face that confronts the subject represents something which exists otherwise than what can be expressed in a totality; therefore, Levinas claims that this otherness is transcendent to the conscious self. For the transcendent to avoid conscious grasp, it must be otherwise than ontological, for if it fit within the ontological scheme of the world, then experience could embrace it and reflect upon it. Nevertheless, the self is not unaffected. The transcendent affects by a moral exigency that puts the self into question, judges the freedom the self assumes in its consumption. It is this relationship between the self that has been judged and the other as transcendent and otherwise than ontological that will comprise for Levinas the heart of his phenomenological religion, for, he claims, "the

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<sup>183</sup> Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 303.

distinction between transcendence toward the other man and transcendence toward God should not be made too quickly.”<sup>184</sup>

If transcendence encounters the subject prior to conscious grasping, then the relationship between the two must occur in a moment of the self’s absolute passivity. The subject in this instance cannot be identified with the powerful, world-making “I” of consciousness, but, in fact, embodies its etymological meaning. The subject is subjected, thrown under, put into question and called to account without asking, “What then is it to me? Where does he get his right to command? What have I done to be from the start in debt?”<sup>185</sup> The summons to the subject in its passivity can be summarized in the Biblical accounts which Levinas employs, the archetype of which being the response of Isaiah to God’s call, “Whom shall I send?” The English translation of Isaiah’s answer, “Here I am,” is insufficient for Levinas’s point. However, both the Hebrew and the French translation announce the subject in the accusative, where a more proper English rendering would be, “Behold me.” The accusative, linguistically speaking, signifies the direct object, that which receives the action just as the subject passively receives the more of the other prior to conscious reflection. Now, however, our investigation is at its crisis point. How does one go from describing an encounter with an-other person to citing Isaiah’s encounter with God? How did God sneak in?

The horizon that is more than consciousness lies in the transcendent as condition for the self to emerge as ethical. Levinas has been read to suggest that the transcendent behind the face of the other person is initiated at the advent of the other. While this

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<sup>184</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “Philosophy and Awakening,” in *Entre Nous*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 87.

<sup>185</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 87.

reading is alluring and easily made due to the confusion between the face as seemingly both concrete and transcendental, it must be resisted. The approach of the other opens the conscious subject to the realization of the excess that was already there as condition for the “I,” confirming the subject’s relation to transcendence. The other is evidence of the binding between the self and the ethical call that transcends consciousness. The face, then, signifies as ethical because it orients the self to an excess of consciousness, which has already been shown to sub-ject the subject in responsibility.”<sup>186</sup>

What is suggested in an excess of consciousness is not something rational, for ideas are held within conscious thought. The idea of transcendence opened up at the coming of the other ruptures consciousness, signals a breakup of the self’s integrity, thinks more than can be thought. Such transcendence, unrecoverable in reflection, conserves the possibility of God. In this view, “transcendence is no longer a failed immanence. It has the sort of excellence proper to Spirit: perfection, or the Good.”<sup>187</sup> Transcendence gains its significance as the Good in the phenomenology of responsibility which discloses the subject as implicated in the excess of consciousness, implicated in “an obedience to the absolute order - to the perfect authority - an originating obedience to the perfect authority, to the word of God, on condition of naming God only in terms of this obedience.”<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> Levinas is very emphatic about the sub-jection of the self, claiming that the “I” is a “being subject to everything.” *Otherwise than Being*, 146. We shall discuss the problem of how to understand the face in chapter three and how to understand subjection to all in chapter four.

<sup>187</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “The Idea of the Infinite in Us,” *Entre Nous*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 221.

<sup>188</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “From the One to the Other,” *Entre Nous*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 152.

What we have just described is the essence of phenomenological religion - *religion in its etymological sense of to tie or bind again*. The self and the transcendent God are bound again in the relation of the self to the other, implicating every human being in this religion. The self is not religious because it is ethical, but ethical because it is religious. Religion here, though, obviously takes on a different connotation than what Janicaud assumed in his criticism. Far from being a philosophy based upon scriptural proof-texts, Levinas has constructed his arguments based upon phenomenological analysis. The fact that his phenomenology falls in line with some Biblical stories only indicates that the Bible is a reliable record of the structural relationship between human and transcendent. Rather, Levinas finds scripture to be insightful concerning the manner in which the subject exists in the face of the truly other, which Levinas names God.

### **Phenomenological Religion Reapplied to a Jewish Context**

Having constructed this phenomenological religion, Levinas can now apply it to his Jewish experience as a survivor of National Socialism. If there is anything Jewish to which one can easily point that influences Levinas's work, it is that Levinas wants to address God and ethics in a world after the Holocaust. In his philosophy, he is not only attempting to define the ethical nature of the human, but also to disclose the significance - or rather lack of significance - of suffering caused by those who ignore their ethical grounding. What I hope to show here is that Levinas does not rely upon established tradition or theology in order to answer this question. In fact, he attempts to show that the problem of suffering can only be answered if God is taken in the non-ontological sense that Levinas describes.

Elie Wiesel's account of his experiences at Auschwitz sets forth the problem of believing in an ontological God, a God within being that must, if He is good at all, play a part in relieving the horrors of the camps.<sup>189</sup> What should devout Jews do? If God is good, then the events of history should be just.<sup>190</sup> Those who were most reflective about their faith wondered what sin had been committed to bring down the Nazi's on the Jews, so they prayed for forgiveness, deliverance, and a miracle. For those enduring in suffering, there seemed only two options, either maintain faith in God and His presence in history, or side with atheism and accept despair. Weisel's own turn away from God is poignantly spoken, "Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust."<sup>191</sup>

Simply because Levinas will speak to this situation does not embroil his philosophy again in the trappings of presupposition or religion. Undoubtedly, his experiences prompted him to rethink how one can express God and the reality of the Holocaust at the same time. Experience began his questioning; it did not provide the answer or even direction. Secondly, being involved with theodicy does not necessarily tie Levinas to religion. In "Useless Suffering," Levinas sketches the tradition of theodicy in Western thought and argues that reconciling God with the problem of evil has

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<sup>189</sup> Elie Wiesel, Night (New York: Bantam, 1986).

<sup>190</sup> I am assuming without argument as Wiesel and Levinas do that the Holocaust is a serious problem for those who want to claim that God has assured justice within history; however, it is not necessarily the case that everyone who tackles this problem finds the situation irresolvable in historical terms, as Levinas will. Yaakov D. Homnick, an Orthodox Rabbi, writes, "Especially is the Holocaust a proof of G-d's justice, coming as the climax of a century in which the vast majority of Jews, after thousands of years of loyalty in exile, decided to cast off the yoke of the Torah." "On God and the Holocaust," in Philosophy: An Introduction Through Literature, eds. Lowell Kleiman and Stephen Lewis (St. Paul: Paragon House, 1992), 462-468.

<sup>191</sup> Wiesel, Night, 32.

dominated the thinking of the West.<sup>192</sup> The primary form which theodicy has taken is to make pain meaningful by placing suffering within the context of God's plan for the whole. Therefore, theodicy, like all violence for Levinas, places God within the structure of a totality within ontology. For Levinas, it is time for Jews of faith to become adults and give up the child-like belief in a God who "dished out prizes, inflicted punishments or pardoned sins."<sup>193</sup>

"Useless Suffering" stands as one of several essays which put Levinas's philosophy to work, applying the principles of ethicality and what it means for God to be otherwise than ontological. First, Levinas argues that all suffering is useless and devoid of meaning, a statement sure to perk the ears of Nietzscheans everywhere. Even those discomforts endured for their positive outcome - bodily pains that warn us of danger, hard work that produces an effect, and mental hardship that increases our virtues - all "rejoin" those pains inflicted unjustly.<sup>194</sup> Instead of following Nietzsche all the way to the death of God, Levinas declares that the choice between God involved in history and no God at all represents a false dichotomy.<sup>195</sup> God beyond being has to operate neither within the historical framework nor be buried with the rest of metaphysics but can operate as something that matters to the encounter-situation of human beings. To realize

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<sup>192</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, "Useless Suffering," in The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other, eds. Robert Bernasconi and David Wood (New York: Routledge, 1988).

<sup>193</sup> Levinas, "Loving the Torah more than God," 143.

<sup>194</sup> It is not my intent to try to argue this but simply to show Levinas's relationship to other theodicies, all of which promise some good from evil. He describes this rejoining in "Useless Suffering," 160.

<sup>195</sup> Levinas does not dismiss Nietzsche lightly. He sympathetically asks, "did not the word of Nietzsche on the death of God take on, in the extermination camps, the signification of a quasi-empirical fact," "Useless Suffering," 162. Levinas, however, has a way in which to answer "no."

God as absent places the responsibility for suffering upon those of us who witness others around us in pain. While suffering is meaningless to the one affected, suffering in pity and charity for another is not. We answer the call of the hidden God in our turn toward others, upholding the supreme ethical principle of the sort we have uncovered in phenomenological religion.

To this point, we have shown that Levinas discloses the tie (religion) between the self and transcendence without recourse to religious authority and with an intimation of the phenomenological description yet to be elaborated. The events of National Socialism initiated questions that lead to the description of this phenomenological religion by eliminating presuppositions about the nature of God rather than providing them. Levinas then was able to apply his findings to the questions that had arisen. Perhaps, then, we have successfully turned away Janicaud's criticism; Levinas does not depend upon an established theology for his work. He describes his endeavor to describe God as follows: "To ask oneself, as we are attempting to do here, whether God cannot be uttered in a reasonable discourse that would be neither ontology nor faith, is implicitly to doubt the formal opposition . . . between, on the one hand, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, invoked without philosophy in faith, and on the other the god of the philosophers. It is to doubt that this opposition constitutes an alternative."<sup>196</sup> Levinas believes that God without ontology alleviates him from both the opinions of philosophy and the dogma of faith. However, we will ask now if Levinas has gone too far. Even if we grant that ethicality is implied in the transcendence behind the face, can we ascribe this transcendence to an absent God?

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<sup>196</sup> Levinas, "God and Philosophy," Of God Who Comes to Mind (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 57.



When Levinas reaches the transcendent condition of ethical subjectivity, this ground receives the name “God.” “God is not involved *as an alleged interlocutor*,” Levinas claims. “The reciprocal relationship binds me to the other man in the *trace of transcendence*.”<sup>197</sup> In one sense, naming this ground of subjectivity “God” is legitimate, for “God” is an enigmatic term that has the connotation of transcendence. “God” signifies, then, what cannot show as a signified; it allows us to focus on what is beyond our experience. For Levinas, this original relation to transcendence grounds the religious community, providing the possibility of a relationship with that which is absolutely otherwise than us. In such a community, however, only the name could be worshipped and not that which is named, for the very essence of transcendence is to be outside of our awareness. Such considerations remind us of the Jewish invocation, “Blessed be the name. . . .”<sup>198</sup> If “God” be of the sort that is so utterly beyond, then it is easy to see why Levinas will claim that his philosophy represents an “austere humanism,” but it is not readily apparent how this “God” can be considered “personal,” even though Levinas makes this very claim after realizing his humanism to be connected with a “difficult adoration.”<sup>199</sup> The status of the word “God” has become difficult to nail down. If its role was nothing more than the signifier of a signified that can never show, then there would be grounds to support such a usage, but Levinas apparently intends the word to anticipate something more that shows itself in religious communities. The more that shows is a connectedness that encompasses more than the face to face relation but a structure that

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<sup>197</sup> Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 158.

<sup>198</sup> Levinas discusses the community’s worship of the name in Otherwise than Being, 149.

<sup>199</sup> One might think that “austere humanism,” “difficult adoration,” and “personal God” might be found in different texts far removed, but these claims take place together within the space of a page: “Loving the Torah more than God,” 145.

encompasses the whole religious community, and in this case, the religious community is the entirety of humanity which is tied together in a multitude of face to face relationships. Uncovering this more, however, addresses a problem with the face to face relation. It is incomplete or not fundamental enough.

After 1962, beginning with the writing of “The Trace of the Other,” Levinas did rework his language by making a collage from the Grecian/ontological tradition as well as the Judeo-Christian tradition.<sup>200</sup> By placing God and the other in juxtaposition, God assumes some of the personal identity of the other inasmuch as the other is face to face with the I, even though the I cannot conceptualize the ineffable otherness. The ontological trap into which Levinas fell with the relationship between I and the face and the dimension of the divine opened up precisely because the relationship between the self and the other was too narrowly conceived and allowed for a pitting of the transcendent against the immanent: an unfortunate ontological fall. In short, God is once again tied to ontology and what can be totalized rather than the infinite.

To redeem his philosophy, Levinas had to reconceive the ethical relationship in such a way that the transcendent quality of the relationship which defies principle or origin could not be located in reference to the immanent. Levinas tweaked the notion of beyond being so that it is beyond the world, not in the sense of a realm opposed to being

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<sup>200</sup> The catalyst for Levinas’s linguistic turn was Derrida’s critique of Totality and Infinity. In chapter three, we will discuss Levinas’s phenomenological argument that presents the Other as the infinite as well as the critique which necessitated the move. One thing is for certain, inasmuch as the move toward more religious language is meant to pacify Derrida, it incites again Janicaud.

but in the sense that it is “beyond every disclosure.”<sup>201</sup> That which is beyond disclosure appears as an absence – which has a unique relation with the other. “The Other proceeds from the absolutely Absent, but his relationship with the absolutely Absent from which he comes does not indicate, does not reveal, this Absent; and yet the Absent has a meaning in the face.”<sup>202</sup> The order, as command and dimension that the face does not reveal, appears as a trace which is not a sign. The face resides in the trace that points to the beyond, the utterly Absent, a past which is never a present, that which cannot be faced. The ethical no longer presents itself as a demand present from the other, which can be confused as an other worldly world. In Levinas’s philosophy, from the writing of “The Trace of the Other,” the ethical becomes that which cannot be signified but only found in a trace which cannot be approached personally but only as a third person. “Through the trace, the irreversible past takes on the profile of a ‘He’ (*il*).”<sup>203</sup>

The ethical experience can no longer be in the face to face but must come under the condition of illeity, the third man, which is the horizon of the ethical experience, that which cannot be described from the perspective of the self or even the other. We should not, however, confuse the term illeity with a new other in the ethical relationship as though the subject, first approached by another person is now thrown into a relationship with a third individual. Whenever Levinas ventures beyond the face-to-face relationship, he declares we have entered the realm of justice, but illeity is clearly involved in the

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<sup>201</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “Meaning and Sense,” in Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings, eds. Adriaan Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi: Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 59.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

ethical encounter. Levinas's use of illeity, the third man, with respect to the other who stands face-to-face with the self originates from his familiarity with a feature of Jewish mysticism where "in certain very old prayers, fixed by ancient authorities, the faithful one begins by saying to God 'Thou' and finishes the proposition thus begun by saying 'He,' as if, in the course of this approach of the 'Thou' its transcendence into a 'He' supervened. It is what in my descriptions I have called the illeity of the infinite."<sup>204</sup> This third person condition, which cannot be faced as a you (tu), subsequently receives the name "God." Really? Levinas, throughout his writings, remains enigmatic about such a radical univocity between illeity and God even though he comes close to making such a claim several times. Nevertheless, we can piece together an argument for this univocal reading by looking chronologically at his works beginning with "The Trace of the Other," written in 1963, and "Meaning and Sense," written in 1964.

"Meaning and Sense" expands the ideas of its predecessor and utilizes many of the same turns of phrase, sentences and even paragraphs. The following are the concluding words from both essays:

The God who passed is not the model of which the face would be an image. To be in the image of God does not mean to be an icon of God, but to find oneself in his trace. The revealed God of our Judeo-Christian spirituality maintains all the infinity of his absence, which is in the personal order itself. 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.<sup>205</sup>

In "Meaning and Sense," Levinas adds to this conclusion with:

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<sup>204</sup> Levinas, Ethics and Infinity, 106.

<sup>205</sup> Levinas, "The Trace of the Other," 359, and "Meaning and Sense," 64.

It is through this illeity, situated beyond the calculations and reciprocities of economy and of the world, that being has a sense. A sense which is not a finality.<sup>206</sup>

Does this common passage point toward the trace of God being identical with the trace of illeity? First, the conception of people being in the image of God makes a simple reference to Genesis 1:27, but his explication of the image of God as being in God's trace states a condition for all people, a condition like the illeity he has described. Secondly, the trace of God appears in the personal order, but only as a trace. Again, illeity appears as an irruption of the personal order, but it cannot be characterized in a personal face to face manner – it is manifest only by a trace. The addition to this passage given in “Meaning and Sense” describes illeity as outside the world ordering totality but without asserting a finality.<sup>207</sup>

Indications of the univocity of God and illeity also appear in Levinas's later writings such as Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence: “The subject is inspired by the Infinite, which, as *illeity*, does not appear, is not present, has always already past, is neither theme, telos nor interlocutor.”<sup>208</sup> Already, this description of the horizontal nature of illeity has become familiar, but now, illeity has been signaled as a mode of the Infinite. Inspiration comes by the “Infinite . . . as *illeity*.” Can we, however, equate Infinity with God, wherein this notion of God does not refer us back to the Cartesian model which ruled the earlier writings? Taking evidence from an interview which occurred after

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<sup>206</sup> Levinas, “Meaning and Sense,” 64.

<sup>207</sup> This non-finality of illeity parallels the Judaic traditions unfulfilled searching. Levinas explains by recourse to a reading of Isaiah 65:1 in which “God *found*” is written in terms of “God *sought*.” To come to this conclusion Levinas claims that attention must be paid to the Hebrew text. See Levinas, “Questions and Answers,” 85.

<sup>208</sup> Levinas, Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence, 148.

Otherwise than Being, Levinas responds to his interlocutor concerning the identity of the Infinite by saying: “I am not afraid of the word God, which appears quite often in my essays.”<sup>209</sup> Apparently, reading God and Infinity together can be justified, but are we justified in doing so with respect to our quote from Otherwise than Being?

Two arguments can be made from Otherwise than Being to support the connection between the Infinite and God; however, we must be prepared for an understanding of God that does not fit any traditional notion of God as a supreme being. Levinas shows this double understanding of God when he declares that “the word God is an overwhelming semantic event that subdues the subversion worked by illeity. The glory of the Infinite shuts itself up in a word and becomes a being. But it already undoes its dwelling and unsays itself without vanishing into nothingness.”<sup>210</sup> First, notice that that which “subdues the subversion” is the semantic baggage that accompanies the *word* God. The “glory of the Infinite” then becomes embossed in a being. Nevertheless, semantics cannot be the house of being for the Infinite, which seems clearly identifiable with a notion of God not contained in the word “God,” but dismantles its house to be left as something like a trace, an appearing that presents evidence of what, in this case, must remain absent from all appearing.

The second argument for God’s identification with the Infinite, which allows us to equate God and illeity, comes from Levinas’s more intricately developed description of the relationship between the self and the other. Through Totality and Infinity, the ethical

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<sup>209</sup> Levinas, Ethics and Infinity, 105.

<sup>210</sup> Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 151. Some clarification is needed for the “subversion worked by illeity.” The subversion itself is the self for the other. The focus of life no longer centers on the reason belonging to an I but on the responsibility for the other.

relation was described from the standpoint of the other as a call or a demand, but by the time of Otherwise than Being, the ethical relation admits of a response by the self. “Here I am – in the name of God.”<sup>211</sup> The declaration of the self’s readiness – not presence – to act appears “in the name of God” which claims witness to the ethical demand. Here, the name of God speaks through the significations of the I declaring itself to the other. In the same manner, Levinas writes of Infinity: “in my giving of signs, already the Infinite speaks through the saying which is said in the mouth of the very one that receives the witness.”<sup>212</sup> Consequently, having asserted the equivalence between the Infinite and God, we can restate our original quote by saying that “the subject is inspired by the Infinite [which is God], which, as *illegitimacy*, does not appear, is not present, has always already past, is neither theme, telos nor interlocutor.”<sup>213</sup>

How does one speak of a God that is absolutely absent? Improperly. The ethical relation that takes place under the condition of the “name of God” provides the horizon of justice toward the other, but nothing allows the description of God, only the description of the effect of the trace upon those standing in its wake (which is a trace in and of itself). The trace of God irrupts the economy of the self, the totality constituted by the I. God does not appear as a Great Other in this totality to which we might aspire in a relationship. A direct relationship with God is, strictly speaking, according to Levinas, a “Christian concept.” “As Jews, we are always a threesome: I and you and the Third who

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<sup>211</sup> Levinas, “God and Philosophy,” 145. Here Levinas describes this announcement by the self as “the religious discourse that precedes all religious discourse.” Arriving “in the name of God” to take responsibility for the Other is the basis of all religious enunciations.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid., 148.

is in our midst. And only as a Third does He reveal Himself.”<sup>214</sup> As this third, God subverts our natural inclination toward totalization and demands that we pay attention to our obligations. Our ontological mind-set which employs a will to power gets turned inside out so that our will to power becomes a will to empower, to substitute ourselves for the other, taking full responsibility “in the name of God.” So, we have found God, but we are still searching. The purpose of Levinas’s later philosophy is this finding and searching that always arrives too late for the immemorial past:

God is drawn out of objectivity, presence, and being. He is neither an object nor an interlocutor. His absolute remoteness, his transcendence, turns into my responsibility – non-erotic par excellence – for the other. And this analysis implies that God is not simply the “first other,” the other par excellence, or the “absolutely other,” but other than the other, other otherwise, other with an alterity prior to the alterity of the other, prior to the ethical bond with the other and different from every neighbor, transcendent to the point of absence, to the point of a possible confusion with the stirring *there is*.<sup>215</sup>

In Levinas’s philosophy, God has unsaid His house of being and become an improper term.

Once again, has Levinas gone too far? In this case, however, we do not ask whether the tie to God is too close but too stretched to be effective. God as transcendent surely upholds the basic tenets of his Judaic background, but God as absent, as a trace, or as condition that binds humanity in ethicality does not neatly recreate the God of any revealed religion. In fact, the absence risks “confusion with the stirring *there is*.” God, in Levinas’s hands, appears at risk of becoming identical with being’s making sense. We

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<sup>214</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “Ideology and Idealism,” in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Sean Hand (Oxford: Blackwell Press, 1989), 247. This quote comes from a discussion held after a reading of this essay – a discussion which has not been appended to all translations.

<sup>215</sup> Levinas, “God and Philosophy,” 141.



can hear St. Anselm in the background claiming that one must not declare God to be outside space and time but *with* space and time (Monologion, Chapter 22). In other words, God seems to be at the level of the transcendental conditions rather than in a heaven above.

When Levinas describes the founding of the responsible self by standing in the trace of the Third, the self must not only find ethical significance in existence, but the subject also has to find himself as distinguishable within the realm of being. Levinas dubs this realm the *il y a*, a sheer there-ness that embraces every human being and eludes cognitive mastery: “The *il y a*, inasmuch as it resists a personal form, is ‘being in general.’ . . . For *il y a transcends* [emphasis added] inwardness as well as exteriority, a distinction which it no longer even renders possible.”<sup>216</sup> As the subject emerges from the *il y a*, interiority coalesces for the individual, an interiority which can, as we have seen, be interrupted by the intrusion of the face and exposed to another transcendence Levinas calls God. How does one distinguish between two transcendences, two things that are totally otherwise, totally beyond our comprehension? As I have suggested in this chapter, the transcendence revealed in the face brings the idea of God to mind, and Levinas would be consistent if the transcendent *il y a* also brought God to mind. Unfortunately, he claims the opposite, “rather than to a God, the notion of the *il y a* leads us to the absence of God, the absence of any being.”<sup>217</sup> We clearly have two unidentifiable absences, transcendents, one of which leads to God whereas the other, apparently, does not. Such an ambiguity certainly does not make Levinas’s statements

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<sup>216</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, Existence and Existents, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2001), 52.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

about the place of God in his philosophy meaningless; rather, the idea of God is now haunted by an ambiguity that begs the question of whether one can distinguish between things that cannot be cognized.

In conclusion, we have uncovered, in Levinas, a religion prior to religion, a binding between the self and the transcendent that is originative of the self as responsible. We have dismissed Janicaud's accusation that Levinas relies upon an established theological tradition in favor of a presuppositionless phenomenology incited by Levinas's own personal experiences as a Jew under National Socialism. However, the ambiguity of transcendence we found allows us to wonder if established religions can be grounded upon the relationship which Levinas claims leads us *a-Dieu*.

## CHAPTER FOUR Ontic Reparations

### Introduction

Having established that Levinas employs a broader understanding of phenomenological methodology than many traditional accounts and having defended Levinas against the accusation of religious presuppositions, we must discuss the phenomenological descriptions he makes in order to place his content within the sphere of phenomenology inasmuch as we have done for his methodology. As stated in the introduction, Levinas's guiding problematic is a proper phenomenology of the self wherein those conditions which define the self's way of being in the world are disclosed. Totality and Infinity, however, Levinas's first major work, often seems to deviate from this problematic for a phenomenology of the other. In this chapter, we will explore the content of Levinas's descriptions, explicating the departure from totality to the recognition of infinity and the connection this philosophy has with the self. It is now well known in Levinasian studies that Jacques Derrida was inspired by Totality and Infinity, but Derrida's turn towards ethics begins with a critique of this seminal work. If we understand properly Levinas's conjunction (the often overlooked *and*) between totality and infinity, we will see a partial response to Derrida within this work alone, but we also need to see how Derrida prepares the way for a deepening of Levinas's investigation into the conditions of the self where the infinite becomes originary of the human self as human.

Totality and Infinity was hardly capable of withstanding a deconstructive critique by Derrida, primarily because its focus was on righting phenomenology after the conjunction of Heidegger's life and philosophy had shown how a link between

phenomenology and ontology could be co-opted by a political view. Since phenomenology endeavors to become presuppositionless in its methodology, the politicizing that took place under Heidegger, as discussed in chapter one, suggests that phenomenology had not yet uncovered all the presuppositions that supported Heidegger's position. The critique offered by Levinas does not desire to undo phenomenology and ontology, but rather to put ontology in question as the ultimate goal and fundamental role of phenomenology.<sup>218</sup> The historical cycle of critique that begins with Levinas on Heidegger and proceeds through Derrida on Levinas has shaped the current of ethical philosophy in phenomenology. In this chapter, we will uncover the infamous "climate of Heidegger" from which Levinas desires an escape and outline the climax of this critique in Totality and Infinity, giving special attention to the phenomenological descriptions Levinas offers, until finally dealing with Derrida and the eventual thrust that he gives in furthering Levinas's disclosure of the ethical in the self.

### **Imprisoned in Totality: The Heideggerian Legacy**

As was discussed in chapter one, Levinas's understanding and critique of Husserl was often due to an early and powerful Heideggerian influence that ran its course much like a torrid affair. After his dissertation on Husserl, Levinas planned to write another book for the French introducing the main ideas of Heidegger's thought, the first chapter of which appeared as "Martin Heidegger and Ontology" in the Revue Philosophique. The positive force of this influence was short lived on account of Heidegger's involvement with fascism. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that Levinas's

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<sup>218</sup> The directness of this critique can be seen in Levinas's essay, "Is Ontology Fundamental?" originally written in 1951, reprinted in Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings, eds. Adriaan Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 1-10.

critique of Heidegger is based solely on the basis of personal or political reasons, which we outlined in chapter one. Levinas clearly acknowledges the extraordinary importance of Heidegger's contributions to philosophy throughout his career, but the very possibility of a philosophical program leading to Nazi involvement was cause enough for Levinas to look again at the nature of Heidegger's claims. What he finds after careful reconsideration is a philosophy founded upon a model of domination, a philosophy that constructs totality. Heidegger's philosophy may be remembered for many things – 1. a refashioning of phenomenology 2. a seminal element in existentialism or 3. a new beginning for ontology – but no one viewed Heidegger's philosophy as an exercise in totalitarianism until Levinas. Whereas we stated the totalitarian critique in chapter one, we now need to discuss the genesis of the ontological program and the arguments Levinas finds in Heidegger that philosophically build the totality.

Heidegger's philosophical journey to pivotal phenomenological figure begins with his being introduced to Franz Brentano's On the Several Senses of Being in Aristotle.<sup>219</sup> Brentano's work describes the primacy of substance in Aristotle's metaphysics such that existence depends on either being a substance or an attribute of a substance. In such a system, the individually existing substances are without a unified meaning which could be predicated of all substances together. In other words, the "being" of each individual substance does not admit of a "being" of all existing

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<sup>219</sup> The original German work, Von der mannigfachen Bedeutung des Seienden nach Aristoteles, first appeared in 1862. The translation was done by Rolf George (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975).

substances.<sup>220</sup> Discovering a unified meaning for being became a guiding problematic for Heidegger, but it was not until he read Duns Scotus that an answer began to formulate for him. Scotus also investigated Aristotle and arrived at the realization that Aristotle's irreducible substances would be only one way of looking at existence. On account of Scotus's religious belief, he reasoned that God could not be a substance of the same order as other substances classified by Aristotle. Such a realization required not only a broadening of Aristotle's system but a reconceiving of reality as such. In so far as different disciplines, be they religious or naturalistic, conceived the world in substantial terms, it could not simply be the case that the conception was formed by the work of the object alone, as though an object's brute existence totally informed the perceiver. It appeared clear to Scotus that the differing categories proposed by different disciplines were on account of the object's presentation to a subject which responded to, interpreted, and spoke about the object. The task of philosophy, given this subject/object interdependence, is to uncover the object's givenness in the meaningful world of the subject, but such a meaningful givenness suggests a unity beyond different, independent substances. Heidegger was coming to the realization that a study of existence could not

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<sup>220</sup> Brentano's work does discuss an "analogy of being" or what has come to be known as a "focal meaning" that does try to draw out the similarity of each substance but does not ground the similarity in "being": *ibid.*, 56ff. For an in depth discussion of how this work and others influenced Heidegger, see Dorothea Frede, "The Question of Being," in The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger, ed. Charles Guignon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 42-69. Heidegger himself has two helpful introductory pieces that outline his early influences and general take on phenomenology without the obligatory references to Being and Time; they are: "On My Way to Phenomenology," and what is known as the "Letter to Father Richardson," which appears as the preface to William J. Richardson's Heidegger: Through Phenomenology to Thought (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Press, 1963), ix-xxiii. The major work dealing with all issues of origination for Heidegger can be found in Theodore Kisiel, The Genesis of Heidegger's Being and Time (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

be done from a sterile beginning that did not include the “lived experience” (*Erlebnis*) of the subject. However, even with a central focus on experience, he had not yet arrived at his revolutionary concept of “being” unified in manifold.

Heidegger’s early study already shows affinities with the phenomenology that he encountered while reading Husserl’s Logical Investigations: in particular, lived experience over an uncritical psychologism, an appreciation for language and meaning, and the need to understand the multiplicity of categories of being. However, not until Heidegger was able to discuss phenomenology in general and the Investigations in particular with Husserl directly did he begin to formulate just how he might approach the problematic of how to reconcile the multiplicity of being with a singular sense of the being of beings. Heidegger writes in “My Way to Phenomenology” that as “[I] tried out a transformed understanding of Aristotle, my interest leaned anew toward the Logical Investigations, above all the sixth investigation of the first edition.”<sup>221</sup> Jacques Taminiaux has shown that this period, most specifically with its concentration on the “Sixth Investigation,” was instrumental in Heidegger’s thought.<sup>222</sup> Taminiaux argues convincingly that even though Heidegger rarely and indifferently makes reference to Husserl’s Logical Investigations, Heidegger relies very heavily on this work, with the above passage being Heidegger’s one real admission to the importance of this influence. The “Sixth Investigation” brings out the difference between a sensual connectedness with the given object and a categorial intuition of the object, but in the categorial intuition an

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<sup>221</sup> Martin Heidegger, “My Way to Phenomenology,” in On Time and Being, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 78.

<sup>222</sup> Jacques Taminiaux, “Heidegger and Husserl’s Logical Investigations: In remembrance of Heidegger’s last seminar (Zähringen, 1973),” Research in Phenomenology, 7 (1977), 58-83.

excess appears beyond the simple givenness of the object. As categorial intuition assembles the multiplicity of given entities and contexts into a manifold intuition, the excess created appeared to Heidegger as a disclosure of the way in which the being of being “let’s be” the ontic within the ontological. As Husserl had stated, “the concept ‘being’ can arise only if some being is placed before our eyes,” but it takes Heidegger to realize the being of beings in a way that is separate from object-being.<sup>223</sup>

In brief, we have constructed Heidegger’s guiding problematic of the being of beings, but what poses the greatest problem towards disclosing the meaning of being for Heidegger and what will eventually be the greatest source of irritation for Levinas, is the subject “placed before our eyes” that will disclose being apart from the object.

“Fundamental ontology,” Heidegger writes, “from which alone all other ontologies can originate, must be sought in the *existential analysis of Dasein*.”<sup>224</sup> While a description of Dasein is not the purpose of this investigation, it is important to understand Dasein in terms of it being the object of the existential analysis, the object before our eyes, for the great extent of Levinas’s critique is focused here. The simplicity of the German word, Dasein, “being there” holds a wealth of philosophical meaning. On the one hand, the word will eventually stand for the horizontal structure of being that discloses the very “there” that conditions and lets be all beings. It would be best to see Dasein in this first

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<sup>223</sup> Categorial intuition, however, can only be seen as analogous to and seminal for Heidegger’s ontological program because Heidegger’s hermeneutic methodology attempts to produce a “sense” of the being of a being, whereas the unified manifold of categorial intuition is of an object within being. The latter, on account of its analysis taking place within all the limits of being, is realizable and relatable on an experiential level, but the former must give way to an improper realization and communication on account of the fact that the ultimate telos of being in its absolute manifold cannot register as a being on the experiential level.

<sup>224</sup> Heidegger, Being and Time, §4.



instance as Da-sein, where the hyphenation eventually preferred by Heidegger emphasizes the “there” or structure of “sein.” However, as has already been intimated, the being of beings is not itself manifest as a being such that one may simply observe and describe it as it appears. Dasein, then, in the beginning, refers to *a being* that is there, but on account of its special relationship to itself can make the “there” of its being “appear,” not as a being but in meaningful sense because “it is ontically distinguished by the fact that in its being this being is concerned *about* its very being.”<sup>225</sup> Certainly, it is no surprise that this ontic being, now so named Dasein, is a human being.

The human being, alone able to make the being of being’s “appear,” cannot take up a special position, as Heidegger believed Husserl’s transcendental ego attempted to do, but must begin at the very beginning of its experience, factual life.<sup>226</sup> Analogous to

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<sup>225</sup> Martin Heidegger, Being and Time, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996) Intro. §4.

<sup>226</sup> We are, here, only referencing the conceptual move from a description of everyday life to an uncovering of the being of beings. A proper explication must involve a concerted effort to investigate Heidegger’s entire methodology as he outlines in §7 C of Being and Time and as he performs throughout his phenomenological enterprise. However, since we are primarily concerned with Levinas’s understanding of Dasein as that being that can uncover the “sense” of being, the hermeneutic style of Heidegger’s investigation is left untouched. For articles that emphasize the interpretational aspect of Heidegger’s work, see David Couzens Hoy, “Heidegger and the Hermeneutic Turn,” in The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger, ed. Charles Guignon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 170-194 and Richard Shusterman “Beneath Interpretation: Against Hermeneutic Holism,” in Monist 73, no. 2 (1990), 181-204. These two articles discuss from contrary positions the understanding of whether or not interpretation, Heidegger’s hermeneutic turn, is foundational for investigation or not. However, neither article spends time with the major question of how does interpretation relate everyday life to the being of beings. For an article that deals more closely with interpretation, specifically “Auslegung,” and its role in the overall methodology of uncovering Dasein, see Ronald Bruzina’s presentation “Hermeneutics: Another Look and Other Questions,” requested for Issues in Interpretation Theory, ed. Pol Vandavelde (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2005) in press for 2006.

the excess of categorial intuition that signifies beyond the manifest object, the investigation into factual life purports to bring forth a “guiding look” at being. What this presupposes is if an investigation into my factual life can make “sense out of being” by way of that being which is there to question being in *my* factual life, then the being of my factual life is *mine*: “Dasein is my own, to be always in this way or that way.”<sup>227</sup>

Dasein, however, is neither a solipsistic world belonging only to me or a genus derived from the worldly experience of myself and others. Heidegger claims that the analysis that brings to light the being of the human being in a straightforward existential analysis is also the means of gaining a “sense” of being such that in the hermeneutics of factual description, the phenomenologist’s “being-in-the-world” meets the “being-of-the-world.”

Even though Heidegger’s argument can be parsed in greater detail, we have enough of the fundamental structure to focus upon Levinas’s critique which begins with what he claims to be an epistemological contradiction in the relation between the one who uncovers being and the being of the one uncovering. We will get to the content and structure of Levinas’s argument shortly and with some detail since it functions as the necessary groundwork for what Levinas attempts in Totality and Infinity, but let us offer first the simple contradiction that Levinas finds: “Can being at the end still be thought as being at a distance from oneself? Can there be a signification of being-there as a whole beyond the biography? Is a person as a whole possible?”<sup>228</sup> Dasein, ready to meet being

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<sup>227</sup> Heidegger, Being and Time, Division I §9.

<sup>228</sup> This quote comes from the printing and combining of two lecture courses Levinas gave in 1975-76 at the Sorbonne, a time past the publishing of his second major work Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence. The first course, “Death and Time,” deals specifically with Levinas’s understanding of Heidegger, which changed little if at all from his first turn away at the beginning of his writing. See Emanuel Levinas, God,

because Dasein is already aware that its being is finite and consequently concerned about its being (i.e., its being ends with death), cannot in fact meet its goal of uncovering being in total unless Dasein can perform its analysis after death. This first critique from Levinas is epistemological, questioning how one can learn about, or somehow make manifest through existential analysis the manifold unity of being if Dasein is not able to perform an analysis of its own being in its own completeness, meaning Dasein's death must be included. To attempt any phenomenological investigation into one's own death would be to suppose an unreachable objectivity that would place Dasein outside Dasein's own absolute limits. In other words, Levinas finds Heidegger making the same mistake Heidegger claims about Husserl's transcendental ego.

However, Levinas is not wedded to his critique concerning the impossibility of escaping one's death to view the totality of one's existing as his final word, for Heidegger's analysis of death is an existential awakening to the temporal existence of Dasein, which could, in phenomenological description, bring to relief the structure of temporality and, as a consequence, the structure of existence, without the necessity of completing life when the knowledge of the possibility of such a completion is sufficient for the analysis.<sup>229</sup> Here, we should understand that Heidegger's concept of being is

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Death, and Time, trans. Bettina Bergo, ed. Jacques Rolland (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 35. This quote plays on an ambiguity in Heidegger as to whether or not Heidegger is attempting in his "formal indication" to grasp the "whole as a whole" or whether Heidegger is attempting to grasp the "structural complexity of the whole." This first critique by Levinas seems to be getting at the problem of the former. However, we shall soon see that Levinas will have a problem with even the idea of bringing to relief the latter. For a discussion of this ambiguity in Heidegger, see Ronald Bruzina, "Hermeneutics: Another Look and Other Questions," 26ff.

<sup>229</sup> For this argument in Heidegger's own words, see: Being and Time, III, §61-66.

verbal in quality. Being, as an impossible object of study since it is precisely not an object, should be considered in its structure as that which provides the possibility of the “taking place” of the “there.” This verbal “taking place” can be structurally rendered in temporal analysis. Nevertheless, even if it is a structural description that will emerge, Levinas will still claim in parallel with his previous critique that the primary issue is with the relationship between the being which exists and the totality of being within which the existent takes place.

For Levinas, the difficulty in uncovering the structure of temporality or existence with the realization of death occurs with Heidegger’s discussion of the *mineness* (*Jemeinigkeit*) of Dasein’s death. Heidegger understands death as the “possibility of impossibility,” the grasping of Dasein’s limit that empowers free action upon authentic possibilities.<sup>230</sup> Death, as that which is not only *mine* but *most mine*, promises an individuation of Dasein such that Dasein can truly be its being. Dasein’s relationship to being, now properly oriented under the realization that each moment could be the last, is discovered to be one of care (*sorge*), where the world is found as meaningful, where the matter of the world matters to Dasein. Heidegger, now, is ready to disclose the structure of the meaningful world, the being of this human being. In the face of Heidegger’s lengthy and impressive analysis, Levinas claims that “we must be sure that the analysis of being-there, carried out as an analysis of the question in which being is in question, develops *esse* or being in its proper sense, according to its proper meaning and not according to a derived deformation of some kind.”<sup>231</sup> Levinas’s worry is that Heidegger

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<sup>230</sup> Heidegger, Being and Time, II, §62.

<sup>231</sup> Levinas, God, Death, and Time, 34.

has in fact left something out of his existential analysis, which would improperly render Dasein's sense before even beginning a proper interpretation of the sense of being.

The issue at hand that propels Levinas toward his critique of Heidegger is the realization that death, what Heidegger finds to be *mine*, is phenomenologically speaking not mine at all. "Death is never now. When death is here, I am no longer here, not just because I am nothingness, but because I am unable to grasp."<sup>232</sup> In other words, I am not able to comprehend (grasp) death; *I cannot die my own death!* Death, because it is precisely ungraspable as an act within *my* life, must be called into question as that which orients Heidegger to nothingness *and* being. One must stop at death and ask what is this that opens nothingness and being to *me*? Death, however, cannot be grasped to answer the question. Even as one may describe the knowledge gained from watching the death of someone else, little is graspable beyond the fact that someone who was at one time responding and expressing is now immobile and unresponsive.

The extraordinary depth and possibility for philosophy that death engenders does not arise from my contemplation or grasping of my death, which I cannot do, but from the emotional stirring that blossoms in my experience of the death of another person. The intentional conscious experience is unable to account for the horror, the courage, the disquiet, and the feeling of responsibility for the deceased. What Levinas is suggesting

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<sup>232</sup> Levinas, Time and the Other, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 72. Levinas also mentions in his later lectures, God, Death, and Time, that his understanding of the ungraspable or incomprehensible nature of death follows Eugen Fink: "In Fink, the difficulty in speaking of death is presented as its very *intelligibility*. We must receive death in silence, although philosophy may state the reason for this silence. We know death, but we cannot think it; we know it without being able to think it. It is in this sense that death is a veritable rupture and in this sense also that it must be received in silence," 89. Levinas specifically references Eugen Fink, Metaphysic und Tod (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1969).

we resist in Heidegger's account is the quick passing over of death and anxiety to arrive at a description of being by way of nothingness. It is not my death that I die, however, but the death of the other; therefore, even as Heidegger would desire to disclose the being of Dasein through what he considers *most mine*, it would appear, after Levinas's analysis, that the ontic (the other, the being within being, even my own self as a being) is consumed as the subject's *own* death draws forth the realization of the being of Dasein. From the nothingness exposed in my death to the claim that the nothingness is mine is but one short and improper step from Heidegger's conclusion that the nothingness of being is the essence of me. What makes this step entirely improper is the fact that the ontological and ontic were supposed to be a distinction for Heidegger, but with death opening onto nothingness, the ontic is erased in favor of the totality.

This last critique of Heidegger by Levinas is without doubt his most comprehensive, for it seems to describe in a structural way the ontological critique which Eugen Fink offers and the epistemological critique that Levinas offered earlier.<sup>233</sup> Being

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<sup>233</sup> How remiss would I be if I did not note the critique of Eugen Fink who asks how Dasein, in its existential being in the world, makes possible the "clearing" for world-conditioning while in turn the world conditions Dasein's very possibility of being "there" in the first place. One can see Heidegger clearly make this dual claim in Questions IV, trans. Jean Beaufret et al. (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 317. Here, Heidegger states that Dasein is properly understood as "being-in-an-opening" from which being can be "seen," but he follows this with "Dasein, one has to understand it as *being the clearing*." For Fink's critique see Eugen Fink's manuscripts Band 1, Z-IX 31a and Z-XV 103a-b. For further explication of Fink's ontological paradox, see Ronald Bruzina, Edmund Husserl and Eugen Fink: Beginnings and Ends in Phenomenology, 1928-1938 (London: Yale University Press, 2005), 142 or Ronald Bruzina, "Hermeneutics: Another Look and Other Questions," 18ff. Levinas seems to have a *flavor* of this critique insofar as he asks how Heidegger can truly complete his analysis without transcending ultimate limits, which cannot be done, but Levinas never sees the fullness of Fink's critique. What we can say for sure is that Levinas does not make the same mistake as Heidegger, for once he offers a corrective to Heidegger's existential analysis, he does not then attempt to make an analysis of being as a whole.

(*Sein*) and beings (*Seindes*) represents a distinction for Heidegger and not a separation. Levinas remarks clearly that Heidegger would never admit of being without beings. Nevertheless, Heidegger's very notion of "thrownness" (*Geworfenheit*) suggests that a being appears within being, which was already there for a being to be thrown-in. The subsequent analysis of being by Dasein has shown Heidegger's proclivity for losing the ontic side of the ontic-ontological distinction in order to disclose the being of beings, but in the disclosed being of beings, the essential ontic nature of Dasein as that entity which questioned being is not recovered but found to be essentially ontological, found to be bound within/to/as the totality of ontology. Heidegger makes the essential link between Dasein and the ontological over the ontic even as he discusses "The Ontic Priority of the Question of Being":

Dasein accordingly takes priority in several ways over all other beings. The first priority is an ontic one: this being is defined in its being by existence. The second priority is an ontological one: *on the basis of its determination as existence Dasein is in itself 'ontological.'* Therefore, what we have is that the ontic nature of Dasein reveals the ontological as the essential character of Dasein.<sup>234</sup>

We have already seen that Levinas makes a similar critique of the Western tradition in chapter two insofar as the tradition takes the oneness of an individual's uniqueness and sacrifices it to the genus. Here, he finds Heidegger to be making an analogous mistake.<sup>235</sup>

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<sup>234</sup> Heidegger, Being and Time, Introduction §4.

<sup>235</sup> At this point, sympathetic readers to both Heidegger and Levinas have pointed out that Levinas seems to be making a mistake claiming the being of the individual is lost in being as a species loses itself in a genus, for Heidegger points out at the very beginning of Being and Time that being, in its transcendental, horizontal way, is not a universal. See Being and Time, Introduction §1.

As we noted in chapter one, Levinas finds the ethical self as the necessary addition to Heidegger's analysis which will subsequently undo ontology as Heidegger describes as the essential nature of Dasein. However, Levinas does not come upon this revelation with great philosophical speed. The 1951 essay, "Is Ontology Fundamental," first broaches the question of the need for an understanding of the ethical relation between the self and the other before the work of ontology. Nevertheless, the work Levinas does between his dissertation and the 1951 essay does not investigate ethics at all but simply the encounter with the alterity of the other as part of the "what's Heidegger missing?" analysis. We will take a look at three pieces seminal to Levinas's later work: On Escape (1935), Existence and Existents (1947), and Time and the Other (1947). While the first piece does not presuppose the other two, which nearly overlap in their publication dates and neatly tie into each other, all three follow a similar genetic phenomenological pattern. The starting point in each is the description of being by itself. Having been given the thought that thrownness presupposes being apart from beings, Levinas endeavors to describe being without reference to beings. The second stage of description involves the interruption of being by the taking place of the individual self situated within being. The third step involves the possibility that alterity provides for a new path out of being. As we saw in chapter one, Levinas does not consider any phenomenological analysis to be "final." Each of these three early works covers again the same path but with different tracks along the path. Each going over produces a new understanding on the well worn journey. The eventual conclusion to this journey will be the need to see alterity as not only the possibility for escaping the totality of ontology but



the possibility for a reconceiving of the self as constitutively embedded in an ethical relation that provides a path out of Heidegger's ontological prison.

On Escape tackles the need for getting out of the prison of totality.<sup>236</sup>

Heidegger's ontological enterprise attempts to offer a description of being by seeing the essential structure of a being as being itself, losing the individual character of the being doing the questioning. In order to save both ontology and the individual which, in some way, is always already "thrown in," the self must escape and look at being from a position outside. *But that is impossible!* Being outside of being already has a spatial reference which gives away the fact that the supposed position outside was an illusion. Levinas notes both necessary conditions: "The need for escape – *whether filled with chimerical hopes or not, no matter!* – leads us into the heart of philosophy. It allows us to renew the ancient problem of being qua being."<sup>237</sup>

The renewed question of "being qua being" for Levinas starts from the problem of the *ontological difference* wherein one cannot avoid thinking the distinction between existence and the existent. However, this is the very road of Heidegger's mistake, but if one were to linger at the level of thrownness without immediately passing to the possibility of ek-stasis, living out into the meaningful world of possibility, then the possibility exists of offering a description of being without reference to the way in which a being projects itself via being or as essentially being into the world. The distinction still exists, but its distinguished components can now be seen in their individuality. On one very important level, Levinas's work absolutely depends upon Heidegger's for its

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<sup>236</sup>Emmanuel Levinas, On Escape, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

beginning. Heidegger is absolutely right that the being of being can only begin to be made manifest from the situatedness of the subject, Dasein. What Levinas is doing in counterpoint is to take the idea of being's verbal activity and trace back through the ontological distinction from being to the individual being in order to find whether or not the individual is essentially constituted by the ontological horizon of existence.<sup>238</sup>

To the idea of horizontal being, Levinas gives the name *il y a*, "there is," in order to emphasize the presencing nature of being which rivets the individual to existence:

The elementary truth that *there is being* – a being that has value and weight – is revealed at a depth that measures its brutality and its seriousness. The pleasant game of life ceases to be just a game. It is not that the sufferings with which life threatens us render it displeasing; rather it is because the ground of suffering consists of the impossibility of interrupting it, and of an acute feeling of being held fast. The impossibility of getting out of the game and of giving back to things their toy-like uselessness heralds the precise instant at which infancy comes to an end, and defines the very notion of seriousness. What counts, then, in all this experience of being, is the discovery not of a new characteristic of our existence, but of its very fact, of the permanent quality itself of our presence.<sup>239</sup>

What we see here in this quote is a description of the pure fact of being, an accepting on Levinas's part that an escape from the "there is" must surely be chimerical, for existence rivets (holds fast) the existent, or in Heidegger's words, the existent would be thrown into existence. In order to move this analysis from simply a theorizing about Heidegger's world horizon, Levinas is going to have to reverse step and discuss the individual's relationship to being, which we already noted he wants to avoid. However, if one pauses at the level of thrownness, then we see something that will linger throughout Levinas's

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<sup>238</sup> Levinas never relinquishes Heidegger's concept of being as verbal, being's constituting the manner in which the individual takes place: "Thanks to Heidegger, our ears have been educated to hear being in its verbal resonance, an unusual and unforgettable sonority." Levinas, Proper Names, trans. Michael B. Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 3.

<sup>239</sup> Levinas, On Escape, 52.

philosophy. The thrown subject is passive and undergoes existence. If a mood, like Heidegger's mood of anxiety, can be found that expresses the subject's passive nature riveted to existence, then it would be possible to make manifest the nature of the "there is" as it relates to the subject without the subject actively participating in making its own existence possible. Levinas finds such a mood in the experience of nausea.<sup>240</sup>

In order to discuss the way in which nausea delivers up the experience of pure being, we must first disconnect the condition from a physical malady. As an illness, nausea has a cause which carries with it the hope of being treated, but an illness is something that is open to scrutiny, perhaps even open to being viewed by society. The experience of nausea, however, is not something the one undergoing the malaise is able to scrutinize as an objective problem: "The state of nausea that precedes vomiting, and from which vomiting will deliver us, encloses us on all sides. Yet it does not come from outside to confine us. We are revolted from the inside; our depths smother beneath ourselves; our innards 'heave.'"<sup>241</sup> The experience of the impending need to vomit does not present itself as an objective cause (motion sickness, botulism, liver disease, etc.) to a subjective effect (the need to "throw-up"). Nausea comes from the inside; the subject's innards revolt against the subject itself. One becomes immediately aware of the inability to escape oneself even though the very existence of the victim is characterized by the

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<sup>240</sup> Jacques Rolland rightly marks Levinas's use of nausea as similar to Heidegger's discussion of the disposition of anxiety in the seminar "What is Metaphysics." Nausea, while a noted Sartrean theme, appears in both Sartre and Levinas without any obvious connection between the two. *On Escape* appears three years before Sartre's publication, but it is clear that Sartre's work had its first draft by 1931. While their discussions of nausea are similar, any indebtedness from one to the other is impossible to make; therefore, we will stay within Levinas's own discussion without referencing Sartre.

<sup>241</sup> Levinas, *On Escape*, 66.

desperate need to get out. “In nausea . . . we are at the same time riveted to ourselves, enclosed in a tight circle that smothers. We are there, and there is nothing more to be done, or anything to add to this fact that we have been entirely delivered up, that everything is consumed: *this is the very experience of pure being.*”<sup>242</sup> The postulating Levinas has done about the nature of the “there is” and its brutal nature comes through in experience for the subject that passively undergoes the malaise of nausea. Whereas Heidegger’s subject quickly moves to take charge of being as mine and actively synthesizes the objects given in the horizon, Levinas’s pause at the riveted subject reveals a relationship with being from which one desires to escape (would “evade” not be better here?), and insofar as what has been presented, the very hope for escape was from the outset declared to be chimerical, but at the end of this first short essay, Levinas proclaims the need to get “out of being by a new path.” The combination of the need for escape and the focus upon the passive subject will be constant themes for the remainder of his work.

The passive, riveted subject appears again in Existence and Existents, a title Levinas chooses for a discussion of pure being and individual beings simply based on the euphony of the words. Here, Levinas returns to the description of the self as acted upon by pure being, but he moves away from nausea for another experience: insomnia. Insomnia also works as an orientation within being which the subject passively undergoes, promising a look again at the “there is.” Nausea is left behind because insomnia appears as an instance within consciousness that might offer a look beyond being. Insomnia is part of our conscious experience, whereas its relief, unconscious sleep, seems to be the subject’s respite from awareness, respite from the brutality of

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<sup>242</sup> Levinas, On Escape, 66-67.

presence – being. Unconsciousness, however, fails as a path out of being, but it succeeds as offering an experience that allows for the realization of the individual as individual and therefore a preserving of the ontic within the ontological. Let us quickly explicate this move from the “there is” realized in insomnia to the individual returning from sleep to wakefulness.

A subject within being has a mastery over being as a naïve and interpreting consciousness that ignores the brutality of the “there is” to engage theoretically its attention on objects, but what about the subject whose attention is co-opted by insomnia such that the subject no longer has the choice about whether or not to gaze at this or that? The wakeful subject is forced into vigilance not of its own choosing, lying awake in the dark. The question becomes, is it the subject forced to engage in vigilance, or is the subject forced to be under vigilance. When the night takes away the clarity of objects and sleep refuses to let consciousness slip into unconsciousness, Levinas finds an anonymous wakefulness where the subject is lost to itself without having a proper object on which to focus: “It is not that there is *my* vigilance in the night; in insomnia it is the night itself that watches. It watches.”<sup>243</sup> In this moment the subject feels like an object once again held within the brutality of being. “The rustling of the *there is* . . . is horror.”<sup>244</sup> Once again riveted in place, can unconsciousness, sleep, prevail to release the individual from being and provide the escape Levinas desires?

Sleep appears to be a candidate for an escape from being. Given the epistemological tie between consciousness and relating the structure of being in

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<sup>243</sup> Levinas, Existence and Existents, 63.

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

phenomenology, achieving a state of the unconscious might just work as a way to evade the ever present “there is.” Levinas, however, argues to the contrary that sleep does not in fact escape being but is a move of the conscious body to accept its place within being.<sup>245</sup> In order for Levinas’s argument to work, he must accept that the self is not an “abstract being, floating in the air” but a body. He must accept that the soul and body may be ways of distinguishing certain psychic activity from certain physiological activity, but the distinction can never admit of a separation such that the ceasing of psychic activity by the onset of sleep would extract the self from being because the self is not separated from its corporeity which necessarily must exist in a place. Once again, we see in Levinas an interesting assertion of the chimerical hopes of getting out of being, for the body in a place is not something asserted by consciousness. A position is not something taken up: “a place is not an indifferent ‘somewhere,’ but a base, a *condition*.” Our conscious attention to objects, in what Husserl would call the natural attitude, often overlooks the relationship of a body with a place to such an extent that one feels a certain objective disconnectedness from objects with a freedom to investigate an object as though the context or horizon surrounding the object does not inform upon the

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<sup>245</sup> Even in some of Levinas’s most scathing critiques of philosophers – Martin Heidegger being the favored target – a glimmer of respect shines through. In the case of Merleau-Ponty, there exists magnanimous praise without a hint of criticism, a trend that can be followed throughout Levinas’s various readings of Merleau-Ponty. Two essays that cover the fact are “On Intersubjectivity: Notes on Merleau-Ponty,” and “In Memory of Alphonse de Waelhens,” both in Outside the Subject, trans. Michael B. Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994). One reason for the preference for Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy is the similarity to some of Levinas’s own positions in Levinas’s early works. Levinas suggests in brief many of the things Merleau-Ponty will explicate in great detail. For a discussion of Levinas on the body with specific reference to Existence and Existents, see Didier Franck, “The Body of Difference,” in The Face of the Other and the Trace of God: Essays on the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, ed. Jeffrey Bloechl (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 3-29.

meaningfulness of the experience. Sleep, however, when one lies down and attention begins to wane, gives over the body to its place and reconnects to a place as its base.

Regardless of what must now seem like a concession to the totality of ontology within which one is caught-up, Levinas begins to investigate the significance of the ontic in the ontological difference. The individual does not now appear as essentially ontological but as a hypostasis within the ontological field, which suggests that Heidegger's ontological program wherein the individual Dasein makes manifest the greater ontological structure of Dasein is problematic on account of an incomplete understanding of the individual. In other words, whereas Husserl claims that Heidegger has made the mistake of doing anthropology instead of phenomenology, Levinas is claiming that Heidegger was not anthropological enough!<sup>246</sup> The chosen term, hypostasis, immediately recalls Plotinus and his discussion of the hypostasai that emanate from the One. While Levinas does not in any way desire to align his idea with the strictly structured ontology of Plotinus, as a metaphor, the concept is important. An emanation from the One is totally dependent upon the One as its source, but at the same time, the emanation is not identical with its source; thus it "stands under" the One.<sup>247</sup> Invoking

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<sup>246</sup> Interestingly, Joan Stambaugh's "Translator's Preface" to *Being and Time* makes note that "It was Heidegger's insight that human being is *uncanny*: we do not know who, or what, that is, although, or perhaps precisely because, we *are* it," xiv. Levinas's counter claim must be that what is *uncanny* is precisely that which most needs investigation, for if the investigation of existence is to begin from the existent, one must know the "topos" of the starting point before one can even leave for bigger and better things.

<sup>247</sup>"With regard to the existence that is supremely perfect [i.e. the One], we must say it only produces the very greatest of the things that are found below it. But that which after it is the most perfect, the second principle is Intelligence. Intelligence contemplates the One and needs nothing but it. But the One has no need of Intelligence [i.e. being the Absolute Principle, it is totally self-sufficient]. The One which is superior to Intelligence produces Intelligence which is the best ex-istence after the One, since it is superior to all

Plotinus at the juncture of a conscious body lying down and taking up a position in the world serves Levinas in a two-fold way: 1. we see that the individual is absolutely dependent for its existence from the conditioning, presencing, anonymous “there is,” and 2. we see that the assuming of a body, an identity, suggests something more to the constitution of the subject than a simple ontological constitution. For Plotinus, if the emanation’s essence was precisely the essence of the One (Unity) then the emanation would be indistinguishable from the One. The same is true for Levinas and his view of the ontological difference.

The hypostatic emerging of consciousness can be seen in the conscious body returning from sleep to wakefulness. The self that was given over to being in sleep awakes in its position, that condition of consciousness, but a condition that is not a quality added on to consciousness: “consciousness *is* here.” Levinas finds in the moment of wakefulness an originating of the existent wherein the very possibility of consciousness is the origin of the existent. This origin takes place within the horizon of the “there is” which does not at this point presuppose an objectively existing world. The activity of hypostatic consciousness “gathers itself together, stands up and masters all that encumbers it.” The conscious act encounters a world that is there, Heidegger’s *Da*, but consciousness in itself passively resides in the anonymous “there is” taking up a place, a stance, an orientation. If it is the case that the world of the active consciousness is a

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other beings. The (World-)Soul is the Word (Logos) and a phase of the activity of Intelligence just as Intelligence is the logos and a phase of the activity of the One. But the logos of the Soul is obscure being only an image of Intelligence. The Soul therefore directs herself to Intelligence, just as the latter, to be Intelligence, must contemplate the One . . . . Every begotten being longs for the being that begot it and loves it . . .” Plotinus, Ennead V: i: 6, in The Philosophy of Plotinus, trans. Joseph Katz (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1950), 15-6.



world of self-givenness, a gathering to oneself and mastering of objects, then there is the possibility that a pre-world of the stance taken up passively could provide an answer to the “what’s Heidegger missing” question.<sup>248</sup> Levinas finds Heidegger’s beginning with the *Da* and its meaningful structure to be intricately tied to a world of given objects, which certainly seems to be the case with Heidegger beginning in factual life describing the “handiness” of things, and therefore entrenched in an active consciousness that would necessarily overlook the passive structure and constitution of the self. We already see that even the passive consciousness is held fast to the “there is,” but now that the conscious body is an existent within existence, we should not leave out the possibility that there are other ways in which the consciousness is passively oriented.

Understanding how the stance taken up by the subject as condition, which can make known certain structures inherent in what is intentionally grasped, is different from the naive consciousness which theoretically interprets the world is important for seeing how one might now understand Levinas’s need to get “out of being by a new path.” Getting out of being would be analogous to Levinas’s later claim to need “to leave the climate of Heidegger.” Active consciousness as a grasping extension into and onto the world creates an ontology of the subject’s domination most evident in the concept of “mineness.” The passive, situated subject constituted not only in the ontological

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<sup>248</sup> Let us take a moment to stop the Heidegger bashing. While there are certain problems with his analysis as we have discussed in this section, Heidegger’s use of the term *Sinn* when discussing the “sensing” or “meaningfulness” of the structures he intends to indicate does not have the same connotation as what Levinas is here describing. *Sinn* is not exactly the mental, grasping word one might expect if Levinas were completely correct in his critique. The structures Heidegger indicates are more “sensed” with the double meaning of that word in full operation. The kind of non-intellectual “feeling” of what is going on in Being is closer to Levinas’s idea that in the overwhelming of the subject by emotion brings forth a feeling of the “there is.” See Existence and Existents, 68.

conditions of the presencing “there is” also sits within an ontic world of other things and other people. Alterity holds the possibility of de-centering the self from its conscious hold on being. The way out of being and out of the climate of Heidegger, then, is not a denial of ontology but a realization of the necessity of an ontology that repairs the importance and the constitutive power of other ontically present people and things.<sup>249</sup>

### **The Other: Which Infinity are We Talking About?**

Alterity soon takes shape for Levinas as something more than what is simply different from the subject. He investigates the relationship the self has with the other, an other that cannot be reduced to theoretical knowledge, an other that must always remain outside the confines of ontology.<sup>250</sup> On account of its irreducible nature, Levinas considers the relationship with the other to be foundational and the event wherein the “human, as such, begins.”<sup>251</sup> This human beginning takes place within the structural relationship with the other, what Levinas will come to describe as the very possibility of ethics. Levinas’s appeal and genius, and perhaps the greatest source of contention from his detractors, shines through in what John Wild characterizes as a “phenomenology of

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<sup>249</sup> Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of the body is just such a needed piece of phenomenology wherein one realizes that one’s own body is an object for contemplation and understanding, but at the same time the body operates as transcendently constitutive of how one encounters the world, so it is both ontic object within being but transcendently constitutive of the self.

<sup>250</sup>With so much having already been said about the dominating, totalizing ontology of Heidegger based on Dasein’s ability to make ontological being “mine,” it should not come as a shock that “reduction to theoretical knowledge” and “confines of ontology” appear in parallel grammatical construction here. The two become one and the same in Levinas’s critique, but we should not forget chapter one wherein the “spirit of phenomenology” is precisely a “showing” beyond theoretical knowledge to something perpetually open and non-totalizable.

<sup>251</sup>Emmanuel Levinas, “Preface,” in *Entre Nous: Thinking of the Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

the other” in his introduction to Levinas’s Totality and Infinity.<sup>252</sup> Our task here will be to see how this “phenomenology of the other” or what Levinas willingly calls a “phenomenology of the noumenon” escapes Heidegger’s ontological climate in order to give a greater characterization of the subject, that being which is not only riveted to being but is also oriented within being in certain transcendental ways. The most important understanding added in Totality and Infinity is an explanation of *how* the other undermines the totalizing subject and shows the ego to be more than a knowing, investigating quantity. Our present section, “The Other: Which Infinity are We Talking About,” will begin with a short definition of the “other” and several of its meanings (a multiplicity which makes speaking of the other even more difficult); and continue with a longer discussion of the ego, or that subject which is to be undermined; and finally we will explicate the way in which the other as infinity interrupts and de-centers the subject.

Levinas uses the term other for a variety of different concepts. Perhaps the least important to his philosophy is the recognition that the “I” can be an other to itself.<sup>253</sup> Each person goes through many alterations in life such that one can say, “I am not the same person I was yesterday, a year ago, or even moments ago.” These different aspects or phases of life can be distinguished as other than what the ego now is. This otherness, however, is always rightly reduced to the ego, for “the I is identical in its very alterations.

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<sup>252</sup> John Wild, “Introduction,” in Totality and Infinity (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1991), 13.

<sup>253</sup> Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 37.

It represents them to itself and thinks them.”<sup>254</sup> Consequently, “the difference is not a difference; the I, as other, is not an ‘other.’”<sup>255</sup>

More important to Levinas’s philosophy, and yet, more problematic, is when he uses the term “other” to refer to some kind of transcendence. Transcendent otherness may be as simple as the computer on which I am typing or the book I am reading or the lunch I have skipped – again. In these cases, the objects are transcendent to me by simply being objects that are “not” me or “other” than me. Husserl and his discussion of intentional consciousness showed how the world that is transcendent to me in this way can be seen as immanent to my conscious field. An other that cannot be reduced to a figure in my conscious field must be said to remain absolutely transcendent. Let us consider for a moment Levinas’s word choice. He discusses the other (*autre*), the absolutely other (*l’absolument autre*), and the personal other (*autrui*).<sup>256</sup> When Levinas uses *autre* only context can tell if he is alluding to something radically transcendent or to that which is transcendent but can be made immanent to the conscious field. When he discusses being an other to oneself, the immanent variety, he employs *autre*. Often, in order to clarify the usage of *autre*, he adds on the appellation of *l’absolument*, eliminating

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<sup>254</sup> Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 36.

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>256</sup> *Autre* and *autrui* are both rightly translated as other, but the personal nature of the second is not easily conveyed. In an attempt at making a distinction, Alphonso Lingis, in his translation of Totality and Infinity, capitalized “Other” in reference to *autrui* and left “other” uncapitalized when referring to *autre* with Levinas’s approval (See Lingis’s footnote on page 24 of Totality and Infinity). However, the convention has hurt as much as it helped. Levinas sometimes capitalized *autre* when he used the word in a more radically transcendent way, which the convention does not allow. By the time Lingis translated Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence the convention was widely used, but in this book he foregoes any such convention and makes no special capitalizations.

the equivocation and purposefully referencing an otherness that is irreducible to consciousness. Unfortunately, as soon as it seems that the confusion may be resolved, Levinas once again makes a problematic equation: “*L’absolument Autre, c’est Autrui.*”<sup>257</sup> What is obviously problematic about this equation is that one must question why the personal other does not appear before the ego. Is not the human relation suggested by *autrui* a relation with an alter ego, with someone who can be seen and heard? Here is the root of our dilemma: to show how that which seems perfectly manifest actually signals what cannot be made manifest at all. In order to see clearly how the other person is irreducible to something in the conscious field of the ego, we must investigate how an ego actively embraces the transcendent within the immanent.

Beyond the overall critique Levinas levels at Heidegger, Totality and Infinity addresses an issue far less discussed in much of the literature being written on Levinas today. It is one thing to say that Heidegger’s philosophy ends in totality, but it is something else entirely to claim that his work was based on an improper beginning. As we have seen, Heidegger’s phenomenology begins from factual life, from my being-in-the-world, but this being-in-the-world must be characterized in order to make manifest the being of the being that takes place within a world. Let us consider the word “world” to have two basic meanings: 1. The world is that which designates the collection of beings with which one has contact. 2. The world is that which ontologically expresses the structure which constitutes the manner in which the collection of objects as a whole is there. In order for Dasein to get to the ontological world, one must first begin in the pre-ontological, the pre-theoretical, the factual life of simply being there amidst beings.

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<sup>257</sup> Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 39.

While Levinas is willing to grant the beginning from factual life, he finds Heidegger's description of an active subject within the world to be impoverished and in need of a new phenomenological analysis.<sup>258</sup>

The problem of what the active subject really is begins with Heidegger's "The Being of Beings Encountered in the Surrounding World." Surely a discussion of a being's wordliness would involve both things and others, but the apparent ground level for phenomenological analysis, according to Heidegger, is "the being of those beings encountered when taking care of something."<sup>259</sup> When someone takes care of something, there is not necessarily a thought-out plan for encountering the world. One just does one's business, and the job gets done. However, even though things can get done without thematic consciousness – e.g. Heidegger discusses how one uses a doorknob without having to name and become familiar with each and every doorknob before simply opening a door. Heidegger describes this pre-thematized world as one which a person uses such that the world (meaning 1) that surrounds us appears as a world of usables. This does not mean that one's surroundings cannot be made thematic. Having encountered these beings in the world (meaning 1), it is not surprising that when Heidegger should then ask "which beings are to be our preliminary theme and established as a pre-phenomenal basis" he should give the answer of "things." For Heidegger, one's

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<sup>258</sup> One must beware of the fact that Levinas could be setting up a straw man. Heidegger's analysis is "impoverished" and needs "help" from Levinas. The "help" that Levinas gives will then be seen to lead to Heidegger's unethical totality he so desperately wants to avoid. If Levinas is to hold valid criticism, then Levinas must actually outdo Heidegger at Heidegger's own game of factual description.

<sup>259</sup> Heidegger, Being and Time, I §15.

primary encounter with the surrounding world is an encounter with objects-for-use, an encounter with things.

Heidegger follows up his self questioning and answer session with an intriguing observation: “perhaps we have already missed the pre-phenomenal basis we are looking for with this self-evident answer.” On the one hand, he is absolutely correct and expresses how the discussion of handy things has already presupposed the ontological fact of thing-ly-ness in the world, but Levinas will side-step the ontological presupposition of which Heidegger is well aware and ask how things and tools become a self-evident answer for our primary encounter with the world. Levinas introduces the concept of *jouissance* as even *more self-evident* in Time and the Other, but he will expand this notion in detail in Totality and Infinity:

What seems to have escaped Heidegger – if it is true that in these matters something might have escaped Heidegger – is that prior to being a system of tools, the world is an ensemble of nourishments. Human life in the world does not go beyond the objects that fulfill it. It is perhaps not correct to say that we live to eat, but it is no more correct to say that we eat to live. The uttermost finality of eating is contained in food. When one smells a flower, it is the smell that limits the finality of the act. To stroll is to enjoy the fresh air, not for health but for the air. These are the nourishments characteristic of our existence in the world. . . This relationship with an object can be characterized by enjoyment [*jouissance*].<sup>260</sup>

Levinas’s discussion of enjoyment in “Section II. Interiority and Enjoyment” of Totality and Infinity takes place between the first section’s formal discussion of the Platonic categories of the Same and the Other and a discussion of the human other’s face that interrupts my totality in “Section III. Exteriority and the Face.” Enjoyment has this middle position for it is the necessary, phenomenological beginning that allows for a link between the formal other and the apparently concrete face. It is also here that Levinas

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<sup>260</sup> Levinas, Time and the Other, 63.

must undo the existential analysis of Heidegger in favor of what is more self-evident about pre-thematic existence than the idea of laboring with tools. Not only does Levinas echo his earlier critique that Heidegger has missed something in his analysis but clarifies that one's fundamental orientation in existence is one of enjoying fulfillment: "Is not enjoyment, as the way life relates to its contents, a form of intentionality in the Husserlian sense, taken very broadly, as the universal fact of human existence?"<sup>261</sup> *Jouissance* characterizes the way in which the individual intentionally, in the Husserlian sense, approaches the world in the naïve, natural attitude.<sup>262</sup> The human body needs its environment, and from its environment the body lives, but this living is not the bloodless living of Heidegger's hardware store. The moments of life when one thinks, plays, sleeps, or eats make up the fullness of existence such that a human existence engaged in these activities finds worth.

Given our forays into Levinas's early works wherein he describes how existence as pure brutal possibility of activity rivets the existent into place, we can see how enjoyment follows the argument of hypostasis such that the one who enjoys does so for

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<sup>261</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 122.

<sup>262</sup> Here I would like to place myself in contradistinction to John Drabinski's *Sensibility and Singularity* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001), especially the section "Affectivity as Enjoyment and Desire," 107ff. It will be very easy from this point to equivocate between different notions of transcendence. I am distinguishing *jouissance* (Enjoyment) as the body's primordial orientation towards the transcendent world, but as we discussed in chapter one, this is the manner of transcendence that is still immanent within consciousness; therefore, it is not the case that we have an immediate connection with an unrecoverable transcendence that is not immanent within consciousness. The latter form of transcendence is comprehensible through the experience of Desire as distinguished from need, but as Drabinski equivocates between two different notions of transcendence, he is unable to clearly make the distinction between Desire and need. While I will make positive reference to Drabinski's book in the rest of this chapter, he is evidence of the difficulty in keeping straight the multi-faceted meanings in phenomenology and Levinas's work.



him/herself. Out of enjoyment one becomes a “subject” of being, thrown under or into the brutality of existence, but thrown in as “autonomous.” As a subject whose existence is made worthwhile in enjoyment, we can see the connection with Levinas’s discussion of the “Same and the Other (*autre*).”<sup>263</sup> On the one hand, autonomy expresses a sense in which the subject sets itself apart from its world (meaning 1) where those things encountered are other than the subject; however, on the other hand, enjoyment reaches out to fulfill the needs of the subject by contemplating what is confusing, breathing in what is refreshing, eating what is nourishing, subsequently making what is other than the subject interior to the subject and the same as the subject.

It is now imperative that we understand how the section on enjoyment, Section II, bridges the opening section of “The Same and the Other” and “Exteriority and the Face.” Given that *jouissance* as it regards fulfilling one’s needs, the journey of the soul out into the world to fill an emptiness, is a description of factual existence making a home for itself, then this existence ties neatly into “The Same and the Other” as an explanation of why so many philosophers have reduced experience to a concept of the same. Levinas points to Plato and Socrates as the instigators of this primacy. He reads these ancients as asserting that nothing of what is other can be received unless that otherness is already a part of the inner soul. Cognition becomes for the theory of recollection nothing more than the identification of the self with objects in the world.<sup>264</sup>

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<sup>263</sup> Here we have one of those ambiguous uses of *autre* since there is no context with respect to the title. It seems as though, from the content of the section that the ambiguity should not be excised. *Autre* implies both the simple diversity of objects in the world and the difference between that which constitutes the Same and that which can possibly be absolutely other than the Same.

<sup>264</sup> Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 43.

In ontological description, otherness is something always other than the investigator who is doing the describing; however, the investigator inevitably reduces the world into terms familiar to him/herself. Phenomenology appears capable of avoiding this error on account of the realization that an observer could not somehow escape his/her own situatedness and extricate the object from its horizon to give an account of the essence of the object in question. Phenomenology done with deference to the reduction contained the conditions for righting this mistake by creating a methodology that could make known various presuppositions in order to finally get at the proper essence of the things themselves without the interference of the Ego's propensity for finding itself wherever it looks. What Levinas wants to argue, however, is that even after phenomenology's recognition of the situated subject in its milieu, phenomenology still made the same mistake, reducing the world to be described to the world grasped by the subject.<sup>265</sup> As Levinas complains in his essay, "Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity," concerning Heidegger's ontology, "Being is inseparable from the comprehension of Being."<sup>266</sup>

The same represents the activity of the self that fulfills its needs. Levinas often makes etymological use of the term "comprehension." While the word defines a mental

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<sup>265</sup> Let us not renew what was so heavily discussed in chapter one concerning how much Levinas got right or wrong about phenomenology. Suffice to say that by the writing of Totality and Infinity, Levinas held a fairly narrow view of what Husserl and Heidegger were in fact doing and took time to criticize both. Let us keep in mind that the concepts and practices he claims will right the problems of phenomenology are all born within phenomenology. For the record and to clarify this material with chapter one, we should not confuse Husserl's eidetic analyses as his attempt to once and for all provide absolute answers or a system that promises to provide absolute answers.

<sup>266</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, "Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity," in Collected Philosophical Papers, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 52.

activity, its root is metaphorically physical. Comprehension *grasps* things. The active, intentional consciousness, à la Husserl, takes hold of the world and masters it by making everything immanent to consciousness even as Dasein, à la Heidegger, makes the world mine. However, Levinas's first section which places the same and the other in conjunction also makes the claim that the other is not reducible to the same and subsequently not simply "other than" the same. To make this argument, Levinas will need something more than need fulfillment. We have already suggested in this chapter that the possibility of an absolute alterity must deal with a passive consciousness, but this seems difficult if the subject's orientation in the world is characterized by an enjoyment that fulfills needs. In keeping with his more self-evident idea of *jouissance*, Levinas adds that not all enjoyment is grounded in the fulfillment of needs. This enjoyment is taken up and actively manipulated by the self. There is, on the other hand, an enjoyment of the desirable. Desire, as a part of enjoyment, allows for the bridge to be completed to the other section, "Exteriority and the Face."

In hypostatic solitude, the subject's enjoyment of the world arises from both need fulfillment and desire. Levinas distinguishes between the two with reference to the manner in which these intentions originate. Need arises from a deficit in the self. Hunger and exhaustion drive one to seek out food or repose, and each of these has the possibility of being satisfied. We should see in this need fulfillment Plato's most base structure of the soul as it relates to appetites, internally driven emptiness that demands fulfillment. However, Plato's psychology of the soul does not apply. The self does not become overwhelmed and ruled by appetites. The active subject embraces and enjoys fulfillment. Plato, however, also gives the hint of something other than base need

fulfillment in his myth of love that rejects Aristophanes' myth of the androgynous being. The myth suggests a desire for that which cannot be attained rather than a desire for something that once was had but is now lost.<sup>267</sup> Plato's discussion of love and desire, however, are only glimpses of the absolute Desire of which Levinas writes. When the subject experiences Desire, it reaches for that which has already overwhelmed the striving consciousness with the realization that regardless of how great the Desire satisfaction will go unrequited.

Desire is unrequitable and receives the capital "D" on account of its relation to infinity, which we have already seen invokes both religious ideas of God and Descartes' description of God as infinite in the way that God overflows conscious thought. Levinas is not concerned with the proofs for the existence of God, but, rather, with the way in which the infinite overflows and yet remains an idea within consciousness: the *ideandum* described in chapter two. Despite his constant criticism of western philosophy and ontology, Levinas appears more than able to find examples from that very history which *illustrate* that which could never be present. Descartes describes how the infinite places itself in the finite so that the finite may know what it could not know on its own. As Descartes described the infinite God as more than what could be grasped by the subject, he, nevertheless, claimed the idea to be in us already, a claim which Levinas duplicates in his own phenomenology. When Levinas discusses the relationship of infinite to finite in his own philosophy, he emphasizes the "in" of the infinite as withinness along with its

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<sup>267</sup>Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 63. Find this discussion in Plato, *The Symposium*, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, trans. Michael Joyce, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (New York: Pantheon Books, 1961), 191a ff. for Aristophanes myth and 200a ff. for Socrates discourse on the longing of love.

expected meaning of negation.<sup>268</sup> Because the finite is incapable of grasping the infinite, we must recognize the affection of the infinite upon the finite during a moment of the finite's passivity, just as in Descartes' claim that the idea has to be placed in us. This affectivity of the infinite should be distinguished from Heidegger's *Befindlichkeit* wherein one always finds oneself in a world already mine.<sup>269</sup> The infinite affects the finite in such a way as to think more than what is mine, to think more than it can think. In effect, the affectivity of the infinite introduces the finite self to an excess which cannot be reduced to a totality.

The effect of the infinite within the finite is the arousal of Desire. Given the natural orientation of enjoyment wherein the self attempts to reduce otherness to an economy of the same – an “ego-nomos” – it must be considered a special situation when that which is to be reduced cannot be brought into the economy because the experience constantly overflows the idea. That does not mean that the nature of *jouissance* is undermined, for the active self continues its attempt at reduction, but the failure to reduce that which appears as infinite arouses Desire within the self: “The infinite in the finite, the more in the less, which is accomplished by the idea of Infinity, is produced as Desire – not a Desire that the possession of the Desirable slakes, but the Desire for the Infinite

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<sup>268</sup> The idea of the infinite “in” us is prevalent through much of Levinas's work and signifies what Levinas will call a “transcendence in immanence.” Transcendence becomes interchangeable with the idea of the infinite. See “Metaphysics and Transcendence,” in *Totality and Infinity*, 33-52, and the following selections in *Entre Nous*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998): “Hermeneutics and Beyond,” 71-75; “Philosophy and Awakening,” 84-86; and “The Idea of the Infinite in Us,” 219-222.

<sup>269</sup> See Emmanuel Levinas, “The Idea of the Infinite in Us,” in *Entre Nous*, 221, for a discussion of Levinas's passivity and Heidegger's *Befindlichkeit*.

which the desirable arouses rather than satisfies.”<sup>270</sup> This Desire, Levinas claims is “perfectly disinterested – goodness,” but how does Desire gain a positive moral valuation? It is important not to put too much emphasis on these valuations which appear early in the argument of Totality and Infinity. The crucial point will come when the argument is specifically applied to the other person (*autrui*) as regards the human in human relationships. To be sure, Levinas discusses the human other with respect to infinity and desire in the first section of the work; however, the argument is solely formal at this point and in need of fleshing out. Somehow, that which goes beyond one’s ability to encapsulate and categorize it draws the self forward with Desire to strive to get what cannot be drawn into the self. Consequently, one is drawn beyond the solitude of the self, or at least drawn beyond thinking of oneself as a *solus ipse*, but what is most important is the manner in which the self is conditioned by what is in excess of consciousness. What we have here, and why we cannot yet answer why we can give any positive valuation to Desire, is the indication of our transcendental horizon that conditions the self beyond the confines of an ontology encountered by the active self. As a transcendental horizon *from* which the individual acts, it cannot be made a manifest object of description. The next step in the argument will hopefully clarify some

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<sup>270</sup>Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 50. There is a surprising parallel with Levinas’s argument to be found in Rudolph Otto’s The Idea of the Holy. At once we should be skeptical of making reference to a book that is declared by its author to discuss religious themes, but given the fact that Levinas has referred to his philosophy as a “phenomenology of the numinous” and that Otto claims his book goes beyond any particular religion to investigate the “numinous category,” it is not surprising to find some interesting similarities. Akin to Levinas’s discussion of Desire, Otto refers to “the element of fascination” where in the “*mysterium* is experienced in its essential, positive, and specific character, as something that bestows upon man a beatitude beyond compare, but one whose real nature he can neither proclaim in speech nor conceive in thought, but may know only by a direct and living experience.” See Rudolph Otto, The Idea of the Holy, trans. John Harvey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), 31 ff.

questions such as why the need for moral valuations, but it will also extremely complicate the entirety of Levinas's project since he will equate the arousal of Desire that originates with the infinite in the experience of the self's relationship with a "face."

Already, in chapter one, we found the discussion begun concerning whether or not Levinas was indeed doing phenomenology, and at one point this question was specifically raised with regard to Levinas's discussion of the "face." By what right does Levinas make such outlandish statements as equating the face with infinity or the face with an insatiable desire? By what philosophy does Levinas claim that what is really designated as "face" to be that which one experiences but cannot reduce to the simple equation of eyes plus ears plus nose plus etc? The human other (*autrui*), whether mystified with a capital "O" or demarcated with a definitive article as in "the other" when the French only speaks of *autrui*, surely confronts me as another person, as a human body right there in front of me, a human body that when oriented a certain way presents with a face. The question for Levinas, however, is not whether or not the human being has a face which can be analyzed and described, for this is unquestionably true, but whether or not the face that presents to me a sign of someone who exists as an alter ego can be meaningfully reduced to nothing more than a set of perceptible qualities. Even if phenomenology were to plumb its depths for analysis that could intimate what is not even readily apparent in simple physical presentation by a process of empathy (*Einfühlung*), feeling one's way into the other person's shoes, so to speak, by an analogy with the body known best by the investigator, the investigator's own body, the question must still remain whether or not the ontic presentation of the other human being in a face-to-face

relationship might not condition beyond what is able to be made manifest and so constitute a horizon of experience.

Having designated Levinas's understanding of "face" to be linked with a forgotten horizon, we must clearly distinguish what horizon means. One definition of the horizon of an object would be the sum of things that surround the object and provide it with a context, and so discovering the horizon would be the daunting task of cataloguing and orienting those objects which surround the focus object. Perhaps the face itself, as a horizon, designates the total of activities and involvements of the person, referring to the more ancient renderings of the word such as Greek's *πρόσωπον*, which refers not only to a face but to a mask that carries with it the sense in which the actor is engaged in the world, or Latin's *persona*. Levinas rejects this as naïve: "the *who* involved in activity is not *expressed* in the activity, is not *present*, does not attend his own manifestations." Whatever is manifest in the body and actions of another person, the totality of all that can be viewed, reduces the other person to *quiddity* rather than answering the question "who is this?" Therefore, Levinas is not interested in a phenomenology of what one sees when describing the other person but in the manner in which the other person, the *who* this is, engages and affects the subject in the world, which returns us to the overwhelmed idea and the experience of Desire such that "the *who* correlative of Desire, the *who* to whom the question is put, is, in metaphysics, a 'notion' as fundamental and as universal as quiddity and being and the existent and the categories."<sup>271</sup> A "notion as fundamental" also helps orient the investigation of what sort of horizon it is for which we are looking. Something about our contact with another human being places us within a fundamental

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<sup>271</sup> Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 177.



horizon that cannot be made manifest as a concept but must remain enigmatic as a 'notion' since it must now be a horizon from which experience is oriented and within which experience takes place.

Unlike time and space, the face operates as a horizon of ontic proportions which challenges the totality of the same, the actively cognizing subject: "The face, still a thing among things, breaks through the form that nevertheless delimits it. This means concretely: the face speaks to me, and thereby invites me to a relation incommensurate with a power exercised, be it enjoyment or knowledge."<sup>272</sup> Enjoyment, here, refers to the active needs fulfillment that a body naively accomplishes in the world, and knowledge refers to the active interplay of concepts and intuitions. The face does not cease to be a thing among things, which seems to put it within the power of enjoyment or knowledge, but when the face speaks, a relationship is established with something that cannot be made the same as, interior to, the subject; thus, Levinas calls the face-to-face relationship a relation with exteriority.<sup>273</sup> The sheer manifestation or presence of a face already engages one in discourse because the other person already signifies an interlocutor, meaning that a subject, as a language user, is already thrown into a milieu of language users, such that the intersubjective, insofar as it is necessary for language and discourse,

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<sup>272</sup> Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 198.

<sup>273</sup>For a discussion on the way in which discourse affects the Same see Levinas's discussion in Totality and Infinity, p.66ff. Bernhard Waldenfels does an excellent job of laying out the basic discussion of the face in "Levinas and the Face of the Other," in The Cambridge Companion to Levinas, ed. Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 63-82. However, whereas Waldenfels writes of a change in "tonality" with regard to Levinas's discussion of the face in Totality and Infinity and the subsequent Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence, I would stress a change in what is being described, a move from the otherness of the other to the constituted self in the experience of otherness.

is constitutive of the subject's experience as linguistic.<sup>274</sup> However, the claim that a human being is definitively a "political animal" is not new, but Levinas sees something more profound in the experience of one subject speaking face-to-face with another. Phenomenologically speaking, from the position of a subject within a milieu, the approach of another person, represented by the face, does not allow the subject to carry out normal activities.<sup>275</sup> From the vantage point of a subject in a face-to-face relationship, when another person speaks about their experience, it becomes clear to the subject listening that there are others who also encounter and experience the world, and regardless of the clarity of the content of speech there comes with the hearing a realization that the content of speech cannot be equated with the speaker's actual bodily event in the experience undergone. Consequently, the irreducibility between the report of

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<sup>274</sup> So Levinas will claim that "it is not the mediation of the sign that forms signification," meaning that signification is not first the function of using linguistic signs but it is "signification (whose primordial event is the face to face) that makes the sign function possible": *Totality and Infinity*, 206. Language occurs first, then, from an experience of the other person wherein the face of the other person already stands in as a sign for what is not present even as linguistic signs stand for an absent object. Levinas enhances this with a play on the French word *signifiant*, which can have both a verbal or substantive meaning, either the "act of signifying" or the "signifier" respectively. The face is the locus of both senses at the same time. The face is the "signifier" which makes possible the very "act of signifying." See for example, *Totality and Infinity*, 153 where "The face . . . forms the first word," and Jeff Kosky, *Levinas and the Philosophy of Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 21.

<sup>275</sup> We should mention here that Levinas places himself clearly contrary to Sartre's position. While Levinas appreciates Sartre's insight that another person is a "pure hole in the world" (Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1956), 344, he does not agree with Sartre's maintaining of the primacy of the subject. Sartre's subject acts from a privileged perspective that recognizes the way in which the other is absent but not the way in which that absence conditions the subject. In other words, Sartre's subject takes up a place outside its experience as though that were possible. For Levinas's critique specifically on this subject see "Meaning and Sense," in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 103. "Meaning and Sense" was originally written in 1964, a close contemporary of *Totality and Infinity*.

an experience and the actual undergoing of the experience by the reporter discloses to the subject the essential, non-totalizable otherness of the other person.

The incomprehensibility of the face of another, we can now affirm, has nothing to do with either the attributes one can distinguish in the physical features of the body nor does it involve the way in which the other person presents personal history, viewpoints, opinions, or experiences. All these things can be grasped in intentional analysis. What escapes the viewing subject is the very otherness of the other person. Every moment of disclosure between faces is a moment which contains more to be disclosed.

Consequently, Levinas will see in the face-to-face a relationship that also transposes the transcendental condition of temporality into a meaningful dimension of one's time as lived. The future must have a distance from the present, and this distance is made possible and made absolute in the excess offered by the other person.<sup>276</sup> The future comes to disrupt the present, the totality that is created by the activity of the subject; the face comes to disrupt, by its otherness, that which is understood as the same.

Now we can connect the various themes that have been running through our discussion of the way in which *jouissance* bridges the gap between the sections of "The Same and the Other" and "Exteriority and the Face" in Totality and Infinity. The

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<sup>276</sup> For Levinas, the contemporaneous is always associated with the comprehensible. Even in the structural explanation of time as given by Husserl wherein the "now" moment reaches into the past by retention and into the future by protention, both of these structures are part of the "now." Retention and protention work to make "present" what has passed and what is to come, essentially making the past and future contemporaneous with the present. This problem of the always "now" of time existed for Levinas since his earliest philosophical work of translating N. Khersonsky's "The Notion of Time." In order for there to be a real sense of the future and the past, especially the future here in Totality and Infinity, the future must be something that is experienced as something not reachable but inevitably "promised." See Totality and Infinity, 220ff.

experience of Desire, specifically Desire for another person has the other person as its object, and this object appears to me through the manifest body of the other, most specifically through the face.<sup>277</sup> There is, undoubtedly, a concrete reading that permeates Levinas's first major work, and he prepares the reader for this in the preface with the reminder that intentionality, at root, "is the search for the concrete."<sup>278</sup> Desire, however, goes beyond the simple wanting of another as object because the experience of the other person is the experience of a transcendent beyond what the subject is able to make immanent to consciousness: "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 its *ideatum* – the adequate idea. It does not manifest itself by these qualities, but καθ' αυτό."<sup>279</sup> The subject's orientation in the world as enjoyment can be described by the active consciousness that sees its needs fulfilled, but Desire always experiences an absence or emptiness, "the infinite distance of the Stranger," that cannot

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<sup>277</sup> Merleau-Ponty discusses the "Human Order" by referring to the extraordinary attachment each human being has to the concrete faces of other human beings, especially noted in infants. He takes the article by Shinn, "Notes on the Development of a Child," University of California Studies, I, 1-4, 1893-1899, to be indicative of how necessary a child's orientation to the face of another person is to that child's development. It is important to mention Merleau-Ponty here because of his discussion of the importance of the physical face to development, leaving us just one step away from Levinas's argument concerning the face as the concrete indicator for what is developmentally necessary for ethics, for if the face is necessary for development even as ethics is necessary for the binding of humans together such that development can occur, then we have an interesting parallel that suggests the face and ethics *might* have something in common. Levinas believes he can demonstrate the link between ethics and the face. See Merleau-Ponty, The Structure of Behavior, trans. Alden Fisher (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1983), 160ff.

<sup>278</sup> Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 28.

<sup>279</sup> Ibid., 50-51.

be encompassed and as such cannot quench Desire.<sup>280</sup> The ungraspable, unsatisfying absence encountered with the experience of the otherness of the other person shows itself in the effects of Desire, but such effects are not indicative of the concreteness graspable by intentional analysis but are indicative of a transcendental conditioning within the ontic of the ontic-ontological distinction.<sup>281</sup> The conditioning that occurs in the “more than can be grasped,” which affects the subject without knowledge in its passivity, is the very possibility of ethics. We are now in a position to understand why Desire gets its positive moral valuation.

The entirety of Totality and Infinity can be summed up in one remark from Difficult Freedom: “Moral consciousness is not an experience of values, but an access to exterior being.”<sup>282</sup> In other words, coming into contact with the excess of the face is not a coming into contact with values or even with the source of values. The more than can be grasped provides a certain experience that has the force of an imperative and the characteristic of the subjunctive within the subject that elicits an ethical response. By

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<sup>280</sup> Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 50.

<sup>281</sup> Robert Bernasconi notes the tension in Totality and Infinity which “appears to be offering a concrete description” while it “seems to explicitly evoke a transcendental reading.” I want to emphasize here Bernasconi’s “appears” and “seems” for Levinas distances himself from the term transcendental on page 25 of Totality and Infinity with the fear that the term is too tightly tied to idealism. However, phenomenologically speaking, Levinas is attempting to show not only that the active subject already presupposes the intersubjective but that the presupposition is fundamentally necessary for the activity of the active subject. See Bernasconi’s following essays: “The Alterity of the Stranger and the Experience of the Alien,” in The Face of the Other and the Trace of God: Essays on the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, ed. Jeffrey Bloechl (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 84ff. “Rereading Totality and Infinity,” in The Question of the Other: Essays in Contemporary Continental Philosophy, ed. A. Dallery and C. E. Scott (New York: SUNY Press, 1989), 23-40.

<sup>282</sup> Levinas, Difficult Freedom, 293.

resisting the subject's efforts to create totalities, the face asserts a world which can only be controlled by the subject by extinguishing the life of the human other, which in fact still does not result in control but the erasing of what cannot be totalized. The face, however, in the expression of its world demands to go on living: "This infinite, stronger than the murder, resists to us already in the face, it is its face, it is the original expression, the first word: 'Thou shalt not commit murder.'" The possibility of ethics begins with a subject no longer capable of completing its activity of categorizing all it meets in the world because the other has already placed a demand upon the subject from a position beyond the subject's reach. The possibility of ethics, then, lies in the demand by the other to the subject that the subject let the other remain as other. Insatiable Desire brought on by the infinite distance between the self and the other culminates in an accepting that Desire will always be unrequited and the object of Desire must remain a non-object, absolutely other.

The dealing with an absolutely other simply cannot be by command alone. If the absolutely other is not present as an object but as an unencompassable excess, then the response to the other can only be a response to the other "as though" the other were something to which a person could respond "in a way." Richard Cohen discusses this "as though" as the force of the subjunctive in the face-to-face relation.<sup>283</sup> Problematically, the subject is described as relating to the other "as though" the other were God: "The dimension of the divine opens forth from the human face."<sup>284</sup> In addition, the invisibility

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<sup>283</sup> Richard Cohen, "The Face of Truth and Jewish Mysticism," in Elevations: The Height of the Good in Rosenzweig and Levinas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 271.

<sup>284</sup> Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 78.

of the excess behind the face reminds us of the invisibility of God; consequently, it seems natural to compare the two types of transcendences or even to equate them.<sup>285</sup>

Nevertheless, the “as though” alleviates much of the pressure if we understand that the “as though” adds the subjunctive in the form of a contrary to fact condition. The other approaches and commands “as though” the other *were* God, BUT because of the force of the subjunctive, we are assured that the other is NOT God. Having already claimed in chapter two that God was used in a descriptive sense rather than surreptitiously letting ontological claims in through the back door, we are now in position to understand the comparison. The other, whose otherness seems invisible just as God is invisible and who represents a dimension that the subject cannot ever fully realize, “as though” it were “on high,” places a demand upon the subject that the subject not commit murder “as though” the other were God who gave the command “Thou shalt not kill.” Just as God’s commandments can be considered as the origin of ethics, the experience with the other “as though” the other were God is, for Levinas, the origin – as the very possibility – of ethics.<sup>286</sup>

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<sup>285</sup> Waldenfels claims to see this as a problem in his explication of Levinas’s discussion of the face in “Levinas and the Face of the Other,” in The Cambridge Companion to Levinas, 67.

<sup>286</sup> It is still important to emphasize that the face-to-face relationship is not fundamentally ethical but fundamentally conditions the possibility for ethics. Again, let us make reference to Rudolph Otto’s The Idea of the Holy. For Otto, when Isaiah makes the claim before God as recorded in Isaiah chapter 6 that he is a man of “unclean lips,” Isaiah is not making a moral valuation. The feeling is more fundamental. In the face of the numinous, the subject experiences the feeling of “profaneness.” The height, infinity, excess, glory, etcetera of the numinous makes apparent the baseness, lowness, finiteness, etcetera of the human subject. Upon the numinous, the self recognizes the contrary of “profaneness” and describes the numinous as “holy.” Holiness originally signifies that which is set apart from the human world, precisely what Levinas seems to be suggesting about the otherness of the other person, and while holiness does not equate with perfection, beauty, or goodness, “it has a definite, perceptible analogy with them.” Otto,

## **Totality AND Infinity**

Admittedly, Levinas's work has a seductive pull. His basic argument purports to find a seed of ethics that must remain even after the twentieth century seemed to demand an admission of the reality of evil and the absurd, potentially burning away any hope of ethics. Both the religiously minded and staunchest atheist have reason to be interested in Levinas's philosophy, but more than that, they have reason to want his philosophy to be true, at least on some level. Indeed, much of the commentary on Levinas rarely makes the stinging critical attack one might find in other philosophical discussions. However, to even try to stand against Levinas is to already be at a disadvantage. To simply lay him and his work aside is to seemingly take up the already condemned position of subjecting not only Levinas's work but Levinas himself to a critic's own totality. Actually commenting beyond his text would almost surely entrap one in some form of disrespect which Levinas has already laid out within his text.<sup>287</sup> The issue is not whether critical scrutiny can be done respectfully but whether critical scrutiny can be done without totalization, and if not then a certain violence and disrespect has already occurred. Such immanent difficulties did not, however, stop Jacques Derrida from writing "Violence and Metaphysics."

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The Idea of the Holy, 50ff. The "analogy" Otto finds is precisely the "as though" Levinas grants to the other as God.

<sup>287</sup> For a clearer understanding of this dilemma, see Bloechl, Liturgy of the Neighbor (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2000), 1-4. The issue of totalization and a critic's scrutiny threaten to run afoul of Levinas's critique of the manner in which theory totalizes while ignoring the individual author. The disrespect that occurs is simply the manner in which the author is ignored while reducing the text to its contents without a sense of the manner in which language is attempting to connect the author Levinas with the critic. More on language in chapter four.



We might first wonder what Levinas did to attract Derrida's attention? Derrida's philosophy, alone, is difficult to grasp, but risking having Derrida direct his philosophy at one's own text seems to promise the same outcome as coming between a grizzly and her cubs – a perilous venture sure to end with a lot of screaming. The most difficult question to ask, of course, is what exactly did Derrida mean by "Violence and Metaphysics," or perhaps to reword the question in a better way, we should ask what was Derrida *doing* with this particular essay? There can be no doubt that Derrida had an effect on Levinas which can be felt in Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence, but it is also clear that Levinas never responds directly to Derrida.<sup>288</sup> If anything at all is clear, most commentators took "Violence and Metaphysics" to be a "forceful critique."<sup>289</sup> However, as previously warned, Derrida's philosophy is difficult to grasp. We have already had a taste of the comments made in this essay in chapter one, but it is time to move deeper. Our effort here is to further the understanding of what Levinas means by discussing totality AND infinity, with special interest paid to the ontic reparations made under the power of the conjunction. By picking through the subsequent responses by Paul Ricoeur, Richard Cohen, John Caputo, and Robert Bernasconi concerning the meaning and impact of Derrida's commentary, holding aloft our own discussion on the place of a transcendent

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<sup>288</sup> The only evidence of a direct response is Levinas's short essay, "Wholly Otherwise," in Re-reading Levinas, ed. Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 3-10. However, this essay does not attempt to undo Derrida's deconstructive reading, but to engage Derrida in an entanglement that could see Derrida's critique and Levinas's work as interdependent rather than as dominant and dependent.

<sup>289</sup> Robert Bernasconi, "Skepticism in the Face of Philosophy," in Re-reading Levinas, ed. Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 153.

horizon within the ontic, we will be able to ease the remarks seen to be the most scathing and to read Derrida in a different light altogether.

So what, in fact, did Derrida mean? To begin, and to pick up from chapter one, Derrida responds to Levinas in the name of “two Greeks named Husserl and Heidegger.” Levinas, Derrida claims, accuses Husserl and Heidegger of the violence of covering over the other with horizons that confine the other person within the order of the “same,” which is to say within the order of the philosophically describable and therefore theoretically possessable, within the order of the self. The transcendence of the other that escapes these horizons would be impossible to utter in a philosophical discourse since “the founding concepts of philosophy are primarily Greek, and it would not be possible to philosophize, or to speak philosophically, outside this medium.”<sup>290</sup> Unfortunately, Derrida laments, Levinas wants to hold onto an other unaddressable by philosophy as well as hold onto language, which commits him to the ontological horizons inscribed by philosophy, especially those inscribed by the two named Greeks. Negative theologians have long taken the route to disdain what language can achieve in a description of the wholly other, transcendent, infinite, but not only does Levinas not disdain language, he claims that when the other person speaks “*bonjour!*” the very moment of encounter has occurred. This means, for Derrida, that Levinas’s attempt at suggesting an absolute otherness that is signaled by the advent of language fails on account of the fact that language wipes out the very trace of the other, since language itself is bound to the ontological horizons of our experience.

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<sup>290</sup> Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” 83.

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 sentences.<sup>291</sup>

In order for a face-to-face relationship to occur wherein one person communicates with another person, there must be some ontological structure already in place for the possibility of an ontic encounter. Even if we grant Levinas the need to designate the human person as a hypostatic being which is not essentially ontological, he runs afoul of the ontological again when the hypostatic being must communicate, for language depends upon possessing a conceptual totality, which would again be underpinned by the ontological and which Levinas has already associated with violence. The possibility of ethics would need to be situated, at least, on an *arche*-violence, which once passed could allow for an ethical metaphysics. Derrida's title, then, should be read as "VIOLENCE (at least once) and (after that) metaphysics (if metaphysics can be done at all)." However, Derrida's critique about the necessity for an *arche*-violence stems from his reading that Levinas's philosophy is rooted in empiricism, an assumption with which both Bernasconi and Cohen take issue.<sup>292</sup>

Derrida asserts several times that Levinas's questioning of philosophy is "legitimate" and "does not seem to us any less radical" than what Derrida himself was doing.<sup>293</sup> What Levinas lacks in order to complete his work and make his absolute

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<sup>291</sup> Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," 147.

<sup>292</sup> See both Richard Cohen, "Derrida's (Mal)reading of Levinas," in Elevations: The Height of the Good in Rosenzweig and Levinas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 305ff, and Robert Bernasconi, "Re-reading Totality and Infinity," 23ff.

<sup>293</sup> Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," 133.

heterology a successful endeavor, of course, is Derrida's deconstructive eye (Who'd have think?).<sup>294</sup> Once Levinas recognizes his need for an *arche*-violence, the play of *difference*, then the boundaries of philosophy will be approachable as porous rather than impenetrable and the "possibility of the impossible system will be on the horizon to protect us from empiricism."<sup>295</sup> Since Levinas's system, however, is not deconstruction and does not first seek to lodge itself within a tradition wherein violence has already occurred before seeking a way out, the face-to-face is not immune from the problems of empiricism, which Richard Cohen finds to be the "morass" of how to conceive of exteriority.<sup>296</sup> Some of the pressure applied by Derrida can be relieved if we recognize that Derrida appears to remain within a traditional understanding of experience in contrast to Levinas's reformulation of experience to encompass a broader notion of the self. Consequently, the empirical, the description of the face-to-face, must remain within an ontological horizon, on Derrida's reading, but the empirical, which gives way to something concrete, gives way to a certain kind of transcendental sense within Levinas's methodology, placing in question Derrida's *apparent* game of priority.

Derrida concludes "Violence and Metaphysics" with a series of questions, presumably inspired by his reading of Levinas, one of which sheds light on his understanding of experience: "Has not the concept of experience always been determined

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<sup>294</sup> It is important to note that Derrida does not, by the time of "Violence and Metaphysics," use the term deconstruction to describe what it is he is doing, but this essay does work as a pre-deconstructive figuring of what Derrida later takes as his philosophical approach.

<sup>295</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>296</sup> Cohen, "Derrida's (Mal)reading of Levinas," 309.

by the metaphysics of presence?”<sup>297</sup> Bernasconi cautions the reader not to take such a question as rhetorical, but considering its place at the end of the essay, even though it is not rhetorical, the question goes unanswered.<sup>298</sup> However, it is only at the end of the essay that the question is even posed, meaning that this statement is, in fact, not in question throughout. Experience, then, for Derrida, in this essay, at this time, rests entirely upon the presence of the other before the ego and how well such a presence can be received, but this is completely antithetical to what Levinas clearly outlines as the nature of experience in his introduction.<sup>299</sup> Levinas clarifies his own definition of experience as follows: “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.”<sup>300</sup>

Levinas’s discussion of the face-to-face certainly appears to be rooted in the ontical, in the relation between an ego and an alter-ego, for he expresses that his program is challenged to describe “the relation with a being that maintains its total exteriority *with*

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<sup>297</sup> Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” 152.

<sup>298</sup> Bernasconi, “Re-reading Totality and Infinity,” 26.

<sup>299</sup> That Derrida would defend this notion of experience or even assume it given his lengthy career challenging the metaphysics of presence should give us pause to reconsider what Derrida was *doing* precisely, but for now, we must continue with the question of what he meant. We shall, however, not hesitate to pause later.

<sup>300</sup> Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 25.

*respect to him who thinks it.*<sup>301</sup> Nevertheless, if the description must begin with the relation, it does not have to end with a relative other and, consequently, an other determined already by the ontological. Again, Levinas's introduction, to which Derrida should have paid more attention, outlines the methodology undertaken to describe the face-to-face relationship where in "we can proceed from the experience of totality back to a situation where totality breaks up, a situation that conditions the totality itself."<sup>302</sup> If the methodology is regressive, beginning with a certain experience and uncovering the conditions of that experience, then we would have at least a condition that would no longer be governed by the laws of the totality; however, we must focus on at least two more aspects of the methodology to assure that we are no longer working under an inescapable ontology: 1. insofar as comprehension is structured ontologically, that which cannot be comprehended cannot be ontologically described and 2. insofar as the methodology reflects a Husserlian turn toward meaningfulness, it is not necessary for what manifestly appears to be first ontologically determined to be meaningful; thus, Husserl explains that the first step of the reduction is to bracket one's presupposition that the object at hand exists, in any naïve sense of the word.

The condition of going beyond ontological comprehension has already been met by arguments previously considered. It is extraordinarily important to see the difference set up between need fulfillment and desire, between active grasping and passive conditioning. The critique offered by Derrida presumes an all too monolithic notion of

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<sup>301</sup> Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 50.

<sup>302</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

the self in Totality and Infinity which appears to lead to the equation of the Same and the Self:

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, in spite of prior warnings, it returns as a kind of silent axiom in Totality and Infinity.<sup>303</sup>

The combination of the overflow of the active, comprehending self and the passively conditioned self completes Levinas's understanding of experience in the fullest sense and allows for an area of human experience not capable of grasping the infinite as a content, but it does allow for the possibility of recognizing the ungraspable as meaningfully conditioning the experience of the subject in everyday life.

If we take a brief look at an extraordinarily difficult passage from Totality and Infinity, we will see the tying together of many of the themes of the present chapter as well as a coalescing of factors that conclude our response to Derrida:

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.<sup>304</sup>

First, the conditioning possibility is accomplished within empirical developments; the ontic is no longer simply structured by the ontological but, properly repaired, acts in a conditioning way in an “ontological role.” It is here, however, that we may run afoul of Caputo's seemingly reluctant claim that Levinas is “far too Heideggerian,” seeing how

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<sup>303</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” 109. Even sympathetic commentators make the same equation, erroneously I might add; see Jeff Kosky, Levinas and the Philosophy of Religion (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 6, where he specifically claims that “within Totality and Infinity, the Same is equivalent to the I.”

<sup>304</sup> Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 173.

the relationship acts in an “ontological role.” “Ontological” seems more a poor choice of words than an intended grounding, especially regarding the way in which the face-to-face’s role renders meaning (*sens*). The ego’s orientation in the world is meaningfully directed by the conditions engendered in the concrete experience of the face-to-face relationship. The ontic face of the other, approached with a sense of disinterest (i.e., disinterest etymologically speaking, without questioning whether or not the other person actually exists), provides meaningful sense to experience in a transcendental way, once again noting Levinas’s discomfit with the word transcendental because of its ontological ties.

We have, now, the ability to answer Derrida, if we understand Derrida to mean by his critique that Levinas has engaged in a relationship (the face-to-face) that must first be qualified ontologically before the ethical ramifications of that experience can be disclosed. Derrida’s question concerning the “metaphysics of presence” which ends his essay actually concerns Levinas before he even writes Totality and Infinity. In Levinas’s work “Is Ontology Fundamental,” written immediately before his first major work, he asks, possibly rhetorically, “Does not all knowledge of relations by which beings are connected or opposed to one another already involve the comprehension of the fact that these relations and these beings exist?”<sup>305</sup> The answer comes in the form of Totality and Infinity. Intentional consciousness as active comprehension can certainly investigate along ontological lines the likewise structured pairing of subject and object, which as we have seen leads to an even deeper understanding of an ontological structuring of world in general, and can certainly produce an intelligible totality, which upon reflection can be

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<sup>305</sup> Levinas, “Is Ontology Fundamental,” 2.



done and redone in ongoing investigation. However, in the experience of the world as meaningful, some experiences do not have to begin with the comprehension of existence, as one understanding of Levinas's question would suggest.<sup>306</sup> The subject is meaningfully conditioned within face-to-face relationships in the overflow of experience that affects the self in a passive manner that suggests an infinity that restores the chimera of escape. The ontic manifestation, by being manifest before the subject, regardless of existence claims, directs and structures the ego within an ethical horizon. So Derrida is soundly defeated. . .

After having written "Re-reading Totality and Infinity" wherein Bernasconi discusses the difficulties of Derrida's empirical take on Levinas claiming, in effect, that simply reading Levinas on an empirical level is incongruent with much of what is going on in Totality and Infinity, Bernasconi writes somewhat later another essay, "The Alterity of the Stranger and the Experience of the Alien," putting in doubt how effective his first essay was in dealing with Derrida. It is not the case that Bernasconi's earlier essay was incorrect and that Derrida was right all along; rather, the new essay suggests that Derrida *already knew* that his empirical reading was too strong and *already knew* that Levinas was aware of the ontological tradition within which he worked and, consequently, *already knew* about the manner of Levinas's regressive phenomenology from the manifest experience to the structural conditioning. Does not Derrida in fact claim that

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<sup>306</sup>Immanuel Kant echoes the sentiment that with judgement, at least, some experiences do not demand a knowledge of existence: "if the question is whether something is beautiful, what we want to know is not whether we or anyone cares, or so much as might care, in any way about the thing's existence, but rather how we judge it in our mere contemplation of it." Immanuel Kant, Critique of Judgement, trans. Werner Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), §2. In parallel with Levinas, Kant is claiming that the existence of the piece of art is immaterial with respect to how we perceive the beauty of that which manifestly appears before us at a certain moment.

Levinas's return to the language of the sameness and otherness derived from Plato carries with it "the necessity of lodging oneself within traditional conceptuality in order to destroy it?"<sup>307</sup> In essence, it seems as though Levinas may in fact have already been doing, and knowingly doing, what many others believe Derrida did not think Levinas knew or did – and Derrida already knew *that* too. Thus, Bernasconi cautions that Derrida's work can be "too easily read as a critique." Now the question arises, if Derrida was not nearly as critical as commentators, and even close friends of Derrida, sometimes suggest, then what did he, in fact, mean? Bernasconi's answer is that Derrida invokes the tradition of Husserl and Heidegger, not to criticize Levinas, but as a way of showing that Levinas has tried to cast off certain philosophies that would help his cause, specifically Heidegger's assertion in the letter on humanism that "original ethics" is a "thinking which thinks the truth of being as the primordial element of man," and Husserl's discussion of the *alter ego* in the "Fifth Cartesian Meditation." Derrida's essay is still a question of language, but it is not how Levinas is stuck in a tradition he tries to destroy but how Levinas lambastes a language and tradition he should not have rejected, and which allows Levinas to do what he claims to do.

Consider Heidegger's following quote on the nature of law and ethical directives which admits of an original sense of law:

Νόμος is not only law but more originally the assignment contained in the dispensation of Being. Only the assignment is capable of dispatching man into

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<sup>307</sup> Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," 111. Bernasconi already notes Derrida's less than critical stance with this reference in another rethinking of "Violence and Metaphysics," in "Deconstruction and the Possibility of Ethics," in Deconstruction and Philosophy: The Texts of Jacques Derrida, ed. John Sallis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 122-139.

Being. Only such dispatching is capable of supporting and obligating. Otherwise all law remains merely something fabricated by human reason.<sup>308</sup>

Political, moral, or ethical rules refer, in some way, back to the dispensation and destiny of Being such that an “original sense” is lodged within the conditioning aspect of humankind’s being rather than within the cultural, contractual fabrications of human effort. Derrida’s essay finds Levinas to be attempting just such an exposure of the original sense of ethics:

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.<sup>309</sup>

What Derrida appears to be pointing out is that Heidegger’s “Letter on Humanism” properly suggests the very conditioning horizon that Levinas finds missing in Heidegger. This leaves in question, though, why Derrida consistently seems to point out the need to address the ontic-ontological distinction as though Levinas somehow misses his own dependence upon it, although we have seen how Levinas already begins with that distinction in his regressive methodology.

The problem for many commentators who read Levinas in light of what they believe to be Derrida’s critique is their inability to see Derrida’s essay as pre-deconstructive. Deconstruction typically works by revealing places within a text that go beyond what the author appears to have intended. Derrida, however, notes that “Levinas

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<sup>308</sup> Martin Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” in Basic Writings, ed. David Krell (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1993), 262.

<sup>309</sup> Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” 111.

is resigned to betraying his own intentions in his philosophical discourse.”<sup>310</sup> Levinas is already about the task of saying more than he can and meaning more than he can say. The deconstruction is already implicit within the text; Derrida’s essay is in some sense, then, to show the opening in *Heidegger* that allows the ontic-ontological distinction to be addressed in an ethical dimension. This often means subduing the harsher critique made by Levinas against Heidegger as well as against Husserl. Commentators sympathetic to Husserl and Heidegger rush to correct Levinas’s critique in *Totality and Infinity* as not nearly nuanced enough or inclusive of the broader picture of the respective phenomenologies, failing to realize that Levinas does not intend, at least in his first major work, to give a full account but, rather, to show how the major thrust of each phenomenologist fails to disclose the ethical horizon, regardless of whether or not a close inspection of the obscurities in Husserl and Heidegger might render such a path possible. Derrida appears to show in the name of Heidegger not how Heidegger already answers the question of ethics but allows for the possibility of ethics at the most fundamental level. If our assertion concerning Derrida’s essay is correct, then we should be able to see a similar movement with respect to Husserl, and Bernasconi seems to suggest just that.

Once again, Bernasconi argues that Derrida’s essay is “not suited” to challenging Levinas’s critique of traditional phenomenology, in this case, that of Edmund Husserl.<sup>311</sup> When Derrida discusses the intentionally mediate nature of the subject’s encounter with the other, always performed by analogous appresentation rather than by immediate

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<sup>310</sup> Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” 151.

<sup>311</sup> Bernasconi, “The Alterity of the Stranger,” 71ff.

presentation, he finds Husserl to affirm the “radical *separation* of the absolute origins, the relationship of absolved absolutes and nonviolent respect for the secret: the opposite of victorious assimilation.”<sup>312</sup> Bernasconi finds Derrida’s conclusion about Husserl to be less interested in what Husserl himself was arguing than about judging “Husserl by Levinas’s standards and [finding] him meeting them.”<sup>313</sup> Consequently, Bernasconi focuses next upon Derrida’s claim that Levinas should not abandon the language of the *alter ego*. However, perhaps we might turn Derrida’s essay into more than simply a game of semantics, for it sure seems too involved an essay to be merely arguing that certain words are just as good as and perhaps better than Levinas’s own chosen “absolute other.” If we consider that what Derrida is, in fact, doing with his essay is making clear how Levinas’s own betrayed intentions must not only begin in a situated tradition, which Levinas does, but must also find within that tradition the space to stretch what has been said, which Levinas apparently does not want to do having witnessed his thorough critique of tradition, then we can see that even in the case of Husserl as previously was the case with Heidegger, Derrida seems to be properly constructing the tradition for the deconstructing already done in Levinas’s text.

What began as a question of priority, whether the ontological must take precedence over the ontic, reading Derrida’s essay as a critique of Levinas’s oft obscure discussion of the concrete, empirical face, ends with a suggestion of spaces within the tradition wherein Levinas’s philosophy might situate itself in order to more effectively actuate the deconstructive type moves Totality and Infinity performs. However, whether one reads “Violence and Metaphysics” as critique or complement, it is interesting to note

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<sup>312</sup>Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” 72.

<sup>313</sup>Bernasconi, “The Alterity of the Stranger,” 72.

that Levinas's one essay that actually acknowledges Derrida directly, although many themes in Levinas's later work can be seen as subtle responses to Derrida, does not attempt to defend Totality and Infinity from hostility but intends to "meet him [Derrida] on his way" without the ambition to improve a "true philosopher." With humility Levinas declares "in underlining the primordial importance of the questions posed by Derrida, we wished to express the pleasure of a contact made in the heart of a chiasmus."<sup>314</sup> Levinas apparently sees within Derrida's work an intertwining with his own as though even the most critical words by Derrida held connections with what Levinas was already doing. In large measure, this chapter works as both a discussion of the manner in which the ontic works as horizontal with respect to ethics but also with an eye toward the phenomenological underpinnings needed to carry out such an investigation. The spirit of phenomenology, to which we found Levinas adhering in chapter one, arises here as answer to any Derridean critique, meaning that phenomenology must be more than the description of brute presence. Wherein Derrida means only to make a space within established traditions from which to catapult Levinas's argument forward, rather than leaning on broad based criticisms of western tradition, one need only look to Levinas's title, Totality and Infinity.

Levinas's conjunction between totality and infinity does not situate two polemical poles against each other. The suggestion of the "and" holds that Levinas is well aware of the necessity of totality and the difficulty of expressing the concept of infinity when discourse must start out within conceptuality. The chimera of escape proposes infinity, not as a means of doing away with ontology or totality but as a means of going beyond

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<sup>314</sup> Levinas, "Wholly Otherwise," 8.

what has already been done in the name of ontology or totality. Therefore, when Derrida finds ethics to be possible in Heidegger's account of being itself or the absolutely other to be possible in Husserl's account of the alter ego, Levinas in no way disputes these claims. The issue at hand is whether phenomenology, as laid out by Husserl and as reconceived by Heidegger, can go about the disclosing of the ethical as a simple extension of their original programs. Levinas certainly comes to see the methodology of phenomenology as offering the possibility of such a disclosure, but he does not see the content of their work as engaging the problematic in a helpful way, since it can be argued that their phenomenologies do create totalities in one sense or other. What we find in the suggestion that Derrida's critique offers a possible chiasmus already suggested in the conjunction between totality and infinity is more clearly worked out in the phenomenology of otherness as done by Paul Ricoeur.

Bernasconi sees Ricoeur's analysis of otherness as following along some of the same basic lines as Derrida's "Violence and Metaphysics," questioning the extent to which Levinas can properly escape Husserl's original analysis of the alter ego, seeing at least the need to connect Levinas to Husserl in the discussion of sameness and otherness.<sup>315</sup> What seems strange in Bernasconi's assessment is the degree to which he feels the need to answer Ricoeur in the name of Levinas. If we find Levinas to still be within the tradition of phenomenology, to which Derrida reconnects him and from which Levinas never claims to be in flight, separating himself from the content of past phenomenological investigation rather than the methodology, then we should find Levinas as simply adding to the multiplicity of layers of description that must be done in

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<sup>315</sup> Bernasconi, "The Alterity of the Stranger," 79ff.

order to fully describe lived experience. For Ricoeur, “resemblance and dissymmetry have a bearing on the sense of ego and on that of alter ego,” meaning that the sense of otherness must be arrived at from both a sense of the likeness between the subject and the alter ego and the otherness that cannot be gathered into apperception. He continues that “if this second movement has priority in the ethical dimension, the movement from the ego toward the alter ego maintains a priority in the gnoseological dimension.”<sup>316</sup> We should conclude, here, that Ricoeur suggests at least an ethical and gnoseological dimension as relevant to lived experience and that within the realm of ethics, the dissymmetry of otherness and its unlikeness to anything in conceptual totality should at least be investigated.<sup>317</sup>

What Ricoeur’s assessment of Levinas does not answer, however, is how much of the human order in its various layers is founded upon the ethical structure. Ricoeur assumes the lion’s share of human epistemology to be grounded in Husserl’s phenomenology and only an ethical portion allocated for Levinas, but Levinas seems to suggest that the ethical horizon is more than just a structure for getting along but also a structure that makes even the gnoseological layer of investigation possible. We saw some indication of this in chapter one and Husserl’s move in “The Fifth Cartesian

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<sup>316</sup>Paul Ricoeur, Oneself as Another, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 334-335.

<sup>317</sup> It bears saying at this point that Ricoeur does not recognize the problem with conceptual totality for which Levinas argues consistently. Bernasconi finds difficulty with such a claim and references James Swindal, “The Other and the Foreign,” in Philosophy and Social Criticism, 21, nos.5-6 (1995), 122, as an example of one who finds Ricoeur’s disavowal of totality untenable. However, I believe the tension here is slight. Whether we desire to name ontology as totalitarian and what does not have such a focus on existence to be beyond totality or whether we follow Ricoeur and avoid all talk of totality in favor of a multifaceted nature of lived experience, it is important to note that Levinas’s idea of dissymmetry in the relation between oneself and another is a viable piece of phenomenology.



Meditation” to find the beginning of phenomenology’s investigation to be well begun in either the traditional, egoic mode or in the intersubjective mode. Levinas’s claim will be that if phenomenology needs to move to an intersubjective mode for investigation, then that mode must hang together on a structure that ensures the intersubjective relations. Consequently, the ethical is necessary for the gnoseological.

Finally, what we have discovered in the phenomenology of Totality and Infinity and the spurring critique/complement of Derrida is at least the need to hear more on the structure of the ethical, which Levinas’s first major work only begins. As we investigate Levinas’s later works and place them in the context of various readers of Levinas, we will be touching on the following important questions: 1. How might the structure of the ethical be described when the question focuses not upon the other but upon the conditioned subject? 2. What are the phenomenological analyses that indicate the formal description of this horizon? 3. How does the other in this newly oriented analysis appear? 4. To where does this analysis lead?

## CHAPTER FIVE Infinity at the Origin

### Introduction

But Derrida was right – sort of . . . How can such a vigorous attempt at a defense in the name of Levinas, as was seen in the last third of the last chapter, lead to the simple statement that Derrida has something truly critical to offer? The answer is simply that Derrida fired the right arrow at the wrong target. The arrow represents the accusation that Levinas’s philosophy depends on an ontological existent even as it makes the claim that the existent is not grounded in the ontological order. Our defense has been, up until now, a defense of Levinas’s description of the other, and Levinas makes such a defense with his essay, “Wholly Otherwise.” Nevertheless, a shift occurs in Levinas’s philosophy in the 1960’s, in no way comprising a turn or demarcating an early or late Levinas where the later is intended to supplant the earlier. However, the shift is significant and represents the acknowledgement that Derrida’s accusation was correct if only it had been aimed at the ego who experiences the face of the other.<sup>318</sup> The problematic that surrounds the ego is the realization that oneself “is already constituted when the act of constitution first originates.”<sup>319</sup> This means that the act of constitution performed by consciousness is being performed by that which is already constituted, presenting a problem for Levinas’s philosophy in the following way: if the coming of the other constitutes the self in such fundamental terms that the formation of

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<sup>318</sup> I have, undoubtedly, pigeon-holed Derrida with this assertion, surely inviting a retort to the contrary, but I am not unaware of Derrida’s comments about the ego in “Violence and Metaphysics.” See for example page 213 of this chapter.

<sup>319</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1981), 105.

the ethical should be metaphysics' first philosophy, then how is there a self in the first place already there capable of receiving the other.<sup>320</sup> It is not, then, the ontological presence of the other that is problematic for Levinas, but the ontologically constituted self that encounters the other.

Those who have argued for a turn in Levinas's philosophy usually do so while holding on to the misconception dealt with in chapter three that Derrida was intending his work, "Violence and Metaphysics," to appear as a critique of Totality and Infinity. As Roland Blum argues, "Levinas's subtle interweaving of themes inspired by Edmund Husserl and Jacques Derrida leads him, in Otherwise than Being, to a 'deconstructed' view of the self which cannot be harmonized with the ethico-religious concerns fundamental to Totality and Infinity."<sup>321</sup> This newly "deconstructed" subject, Blum claims, obscures any conceptual continuity between the two works.<sup>322</sup> We should be careful, however, not to assert too much, as does John Llewelyn, that Levinas had in his

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<sup>320</sup> We are beginning to run into another problem with terminology. While Levinas is comfortable with the word constitution, it is not necessarily best suited for what he wishes to do. Constitution presumes a conscious agent, which would imply a conscious agent behind the constitution of the self. Since the self cannot be its own agent, it could be that the other might assume that function. However, as we shall see argued, the other person is not constitutive of the human, but the intersubjective milieu of which the self and other are a part constitute a formal structure out of which the human arises. The structure of the intersubjective milieu would more appropriately be called the origin of the ego. We will endeavour to offer this corrective in Levinas's language.

<sup>321</sup> Roland Paul Blum, "Deconstruction and Creation," in Philosophy and Phenomenological Research, 46 (1985), 293. For other such readings of Levinas's Otherwise than Being as a turn in philosophy, see: Stephan Strasser, "Die Kehre im Denken von Levinas," in Jenseits von Sein und Zeit: eine Einführung in Emmanuel Levinas' Philosophie (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978), 219-51.

<sup>322</sup> *Ibid.*, 294.

early work a “foresight of what he intends to say in detail later on.”<sup>323</sup> What I will endeavor to achieve in this chapter is the laying out of the phenomenological analysis done by Levinas after Totality and Infinity such that the differences between his two major works are not seen as a thought necessarily reconceived but as a broadening and deepening of Levinas’s thought with a greater eye toward transcendental origination. To accomplish this goal, we will investigate those experiences in Totality and Infinity that undergo re-analysis in Otherwise than Being and are suggestive of this broader fundamental origin; we will lay bare the structure of this transcendental origination by examining the central chapter of the second work, “Substitution”; and we will finally re-connect the analysis to the possibility of Blum’s “ethico-religious concerns.” Ultimately, with these three investigations in place, we will have successfully argued for viewing the human subject as that which gets originated as human by the transcendental horizon of the infinite.

The need to re-evaluate and re-focus one’s philosophy in a direction 180° from one’s first major work could appear as a turn, but in phenomenology, it is nothing more than the going back over of already analyzed ground with the new tools discovered in the last analysis in order to make a deeper re-analysis. In order to describe the ethical relationship in Totality and Infinity, Levinas began in Heidegger’s factual position of being at home. The self was already oriented toward things which the self recognized as its own, and by means of which, the self could find enjoyment. At this stage of being at home, the self also encountered others in a complementary relationship which one might

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<sup>323</sup> John Llewelyn, Emmanuel Levinas: The Genealogy of Ethics (London: Routledge, 1995), 5.

recognize as analogous to Heidegger's *mit-dasein*.<sup>324</sup> *Mit-dasein*, however, does not describe a fundamentally ethical relationship, but only a possibility of a constitutive co-being-in-the-world where the presumable constitution of the there by the self and others is mitigated by Heidegger's emphasis of the world as *mine*. The advent of the face disrupts the comfort of being at home, placing the self in a linguistic framework that begins with hearing a "hello" but also demands a response. Within this newly encountered world comes an ethical milieu that reaches beyond the initial encounter to experiences described in terms of the erotic, the fecund, and the voluptuous. What Levinas came to realize, however, was that everything he described, even down to the very first encounter with the face in which the greeting was comprehended, occurred within the intersubjective wherein the ethical was always already in play. The self was not completed as a self by the ethical moment; the self originated as human always already within the ethical. The texts of the 1960's leading up to and including Levinas's last major work, Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence, had to shift focus in order to describe the self's origination within the infinite alterity of the other. Let us delve into this alternative focus by first looking at Levinas's broadening of the philosophy of language.

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<sup>324</sup> Several defenders of Heidegger have offered *mitsein* as the topos in which Heidegger's own ethics could be disclosed: François Raffoul, "Being and the Other: Ethics and Ontology in Levinas and Heidegger," in Addressing Levinas, eds. Eric Sean Nelson, Antje Kapust, and Kent Still (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2005), 138-152 and Edward Wingenbach, "Liberating Responsibility: The Levinasian Ethic of Being and Time," in International-Philosophical-Quarterly, Nr 96; 36(1): 29-45. However, both of these readings make the same mistake that Levinas is already trying to correct in Otherwise than Being by assuming a ready made subject in a meaningful world needing only the addition of an ethical encounter to fully realize the implication of *mitsein*.

## Language as Communication and Exposure

Any attempt at broadening must first begin with a word on methodology, which we have often supplied on account of Levinas's usual unwillingness to make his methodology explicit beyond the claims that he is doing phenomenology, with special affinity for Husserl's idea of intentionality.<sup>325</sup> What would make any researcher uncomfortable with Levinas's phenomenological claims, as was pointed out in chapter one, is that he often admits to not following all of Husserl's precepts; however, Levinas does give us insight into his method of describing the linguistic components of the Said (the coherent text of language) and the Saying (the on-going possibility of communication). In the language we have used up until now, the Saying would be linked in some way to a transcendental condition for the Said, but Levinas states in a Q&A session in 1975 that, with respect to his phenomenological methodology of Totality and Infinity, "it is not the word 'transcendental' I would retain, but the notion of intentional analysis."<sup>326</sup> This statement would be particularly damning to us insofar as this dissertation has sought to link Levinas's methodology with a similar broadening and deepening that took place in the move from Husserl's philosophy to a transcendental

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<sup>325</sup> For a brief explanation of Levinas's reluctance on methodology, see Emmanuel Levinas, "Questions and Answers," in Of God Who Comes to Mind (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 89. Pardon the long quote: "That is what I would respond as far as method is concerned. I will tell you also that I know nothing more about it. I do not believe that there is a transparency possible in method. Nor that philosophy might be possible as transparency. Those who have worked on methodology all their lives have written many books that replace the more interesting books that they could have written. So much the worse for the philosophy that would walk in sunlight without shadows."

<sup>326</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

phenomenology with the goal of disclosing origins. Nevertheless, in Levinas's clarification, the issue and methodology become clear – and amenable to our analysis.

The primary reason for Levinas avoiding the term “transcendental” lies solidly at the feet of philosophy's new gadfly, Jacques Derrida. Insofar as transcendental seeks that which is foundational, the word remains tied to an ontological framework. “Foundation is a term from architecture, a term made for a world that one inhabits; for a world that is *before* all that it supports, an astronomic world of perception, an immobile world; rest *par excellence*; the Same *par excellence*.”<sup>327</sup> Whether Levinas is responding with heightened awareness or a knee-jerk duck-and-cover at anything that can be semantically linked to an existent is unclear, but what is not unclear is that Levinas still retains a transcendental like phenomenological methodology. The Saying, we will see, is the opening in existence in which the Said can take place. That analysis will reveal the need to situate language in its very possibility, what amounts to a reduction of the Said to the Saying. This reduction does not imply that the Saying is a greater genus of language of which the Said is but a species. If this were the case, the Saying could be turned into a greater Said, a content identified as a firm foundation; however, the possibility of language can only be hinted at as that which cannot be thematized, for it is the very possibility of thematization. Having placed his own philosophy within the confines of intentional analysis, Levinas bows to Husserl's phenomenological design in which the primary aim of phenomenology is epistemological, concentrated on the meaningfulness of experience as the contents of experience appear. Saying, on this account, works as a horizon of meaning, making possible the human action of language.

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<sup>327</sup> Levinas, “Questions and Answers,” 88.

The philosopher newly indoctrinated to the basic themes of Levinas would probably find strange the fact that Levinas dismisses, by way of ignoring, the work of linguistics in the matters of language. Whether it is the structuralist linguistics of Saussure or the ontological interpretations of language from Heidegger, Levinas avoids them all as though, in the words of Bernhard Waldenfels, “linguistics were a reign of traitors.”<sup>328</sup> It is not the case that Levinas finds these thinkers to be lax in their work; rather, they are too focused and elevate the Said, the content of language, to the supreme height and reduce the Saying of language to another Said. In the case of the structuralists, the components of language owe their meaning to the linguistic system’s internal working relationships, effectively reducing language to its own distinct structural body that acts upon and through a subject. Language becomes, again, such a master of the subject in the ontological theory of language. Beginning with Heidegger’s often quoted statement in the “Letter on ‘Humanism’” that “language is the house of being,” we find the culmination of Heidegger’s earlier analysis in which being-in-the-world was already a being in language. In these two cases, the sharing of language was merely the deepening of meaning for an already present subject whose goal would be an ever greater comprehension of the system of language or the question of being.<sup>329</sup>

Perhaps most surprising of all is Levinas’s avoidance of Austin’s speech act theory. In the Saying/Said distinction, the Saying looks to have a verbal aspect that could

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<sup>328</sup> Bernhard Waldenfels, “Levinas on the Saying and the Said,” in Addressing Levinas, eds. Eric Sean Nelson, Antje Kapust, and Kent Still (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2005), 87.

<sup>329</sup> For more in depth analysis on Levinas’s position with respect to structuralism and ontologism, see John Llewelyn, “Levinas and Language,” in The Cambridge Companion to Levinas, eds. Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 119ff.



parallel the linguistic philosophy of speech investigated in terms of its activity. If one promises to do something, the thing that is promised clearly appears as a content of language; however, the very act of promising is not something governed by the rules of language, it is an event of language itself. Unfortunately, speech act theory does not truly encompass the Saying/Said distinction. Even though the Saying appears as a verbal modality of language, Levinas's concept of Saying cannot be rendered as a thematized object, as promising not only can be but already is rendered. Whether as noun or verb, the Said encompasses all that is available for thematization.

Out of the anonymous and horrifying *il y a*, phenomena appear as *this* or *that*. Intentional analysis has already shown that consciousness is consciousness *of* an object that appears *to* a subject *as* this or that. Husserl's principle of principles underscores the central truth of this realization:

Every originally given intuition is a source for the legitimation of knowledge; everything that presents itself originally to us (so to say in bodily actuality), must be simply accepted as that as what it gives itself, but only within the limits within which it therein gives itself. . . . Every enunciation that does not do anything else than to give expression to such gives through mere explication and adequately corresponding significations, is therefore actually . . . an absolute beginning.<sup>330</sup>

For the purposes of our discussion on language, the principle of principles reveals that our every intuition can find an enunciation as a point of absolute beginning. From Levinas's perspective, this possibility of enunciation reveals the kerygmatic character of language: "identification is kerygmatical."<sup>331</sup>

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<sup>330</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Ideas I*, trans. F. Kersten (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1998), §24.

<sup>331</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 35.

Identification begins with the logical rule A is A, where the entity identified appears as both the subject and predicate of the statement. The subject, which is declined in the nominative, nominates, points out, or designates an object in a way that holds the subject synchronically, as somehow the same regardless of time. The predicate, which by rule also appears in the nominative, is inextricably tied to the verb to be. By virtue of the verb, the predicate nominative does not simply sound again the subject nominative, but allows the identification to resound diachronically (through time). For an example, Levinas restates the identity equation of red is red as red reds.<sup>332</sup> Quine has pointed out that logical identity statements can be dealt with as paraphrastic and shortened in the very manner Levinas suggests: “The teacher of Plato socratizes;” “Pegasus pegasizes.”<sup>333</sup> In these constructions, the familiar noun has been verbalized, revealing both its temporality and manner in which the entity is expressed in time. Consequently,

language qua said can be conceived as a system of nouns identifying entities . . . but also, and with as much right, language can be conceived as the verb in a 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.<sup>334</sup>

By being both synchronic and diachronic, the Said of language is the thematized milieu of a subject, the explication of things and events, the self’s kerygma.

Interpretations of language as thematic or kerygmatic serve to deny what Levinas finds to be primary. Language is first and foremost *communication* – a relation between

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<sup>332</sup> Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 38-9.

<sup>333</sup> W. V. Quine, From a Logical Point of View: Logico-Philosophical Essays (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953), 8, 167.

<sup>334</sup> Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 40.

oneself and someone else. While a thematic understanding of language is in no way shocked by the claim that language is communication, such thematic ways of looking at language eventually undermine the very possibility of describing the fundamental structure of communication. The origin of the mistake of the thematic analysis is in the expectation that communication takes place between language users participating in signifying acts.<sup>335</sup> On the surface, such an analysis must be considered correct, and this is the analysis that lies behind Heidegger and Austin. Nevertheless, it is the superficiality of such an understanding of language that Levinas desires to transcend. Language users participating in signifying acts already exist as fully constituted selves within a semiotic milieu, but the foundational act of communication is the opening up of one to another.

Whereas the Said is content, Saying is an act of exposure:

Here exposure has a sense radically different from thematization. . . On the hither side of the ambiguity of being and entities, prior to the said, saying uncovers the one that speaks, not as an object disclosed by theory, but in the sense that one discloses oneself by neglecting one's defenses, leaving a shelter, exposing oneself to outrage, to insults and wounding.<sup>336</sup>

The Saying acts on a level far broader than verbal sharing; it operates as the presenting of one's own body, one's own skin to the unknown. Such bodily references should resound with echoes of Merleau-Ponty, whose Phenomenology of Perception Richard Cohen assures us played a great role in the formulating of Otherwise than

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<sup>335</sup> For a further discussion of these errors see Adriaan Peperzak, 'From Intentionality to Responsibility: On Levinas's Philosophy of Language,' in The Question of the Other: Essays in Contemporary Continental Philosophy, eds. A. Dallery and C. Scott (New York, SUNY Press, 1989), 12-5.

<sup>336</sup> Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 49.

Being.<sup>337</sup> Levinas has already echoed Merleau-Ponty's explication of our thinking nature where Merleau-Ponty links language with identification stating that language "transforms me into an object and denies me." Such actions "call a halt to communication."<sup>338</sup> In Levinas's view, as soon as human beings turn to empower their objectifying gaze, their turning, gestures, expressions of intense scrutiny, expressions of apathetic distaste already place themselves in a communicative plane not ruled by identification – a plane that can only exist with subjects exposed to one another. Saying, then, is the condition for the possibility of discourse wherein the Saying precedes the Said by logically providing the possibility that the message can be given and received. The structure of the Saying reveals that in entering discourse the speaker has already been exposed.

Levinas was already preparing readers for this interpretation of language with an essay that appeared in 1967, "Language and Proximity." Communication was there, too, perceived as both kerygmatic in terms of language content, but it was clear that this content appeared in such a way as to be for everyone. At this point comes the realization that the "possibility of communication is given as a simple corollary of the *logical* work of speech."<sup>339</sup> This possibility of communicating-with, however, could not appear as just

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<sup>337</sup> Richard Cohen makes the claim in his "Foreword" to Otherwise than Being, p. xiii, that "Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception . . . presented brilliant and novel analyses of perception . . . Levinas is quite influenced by this work, transforming and integrating its analyses into his own ethical vision."

<sup>338</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, trans. Colin Smith (New York: Routledge, 1996), 360.

<sup>339</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, "Language and Proximity," in Collected Philosophical Papers, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 115. This piece first appeared in the expanded edition to Emmanuel Levinas, En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Paris: Vrin, 1967), 217-36.

another “cognition of this interlocutor in his particularity.”<sup>340</sup> Such a reading would once again reduce the situation to a thought that would already be within the workings of language rather than getting at the originative possibility of language. We are now familiar with the problem of attempting to place within view that which defines the very meaningfulness of the view in the first place. Any attempt at this kind of disclosure marks a necessary “betrayal” for Levinas that must occur but which must also be undone, where the content of the betrayal is destroyed, leaving only a formal designation that designates paradoxically. The first betrayal of the structure of anarchical language comes with the 1967 article and is repeated again in Otherwise than Being, that the exposure enacted by language reveals an ever more primordial proximity between interlocutors.<sup>341</sup> This proximity begins its un-saying in the re-analysis of the significance of the other, which will finally reconnect us with the end of chapter one and Levinas’s analysis of hetero-affection in the light of a new sense of temporality and sensibility.

### **Temporality and Sensibility at the Beginning**

We must, now, solidly reassert that the analysis of Totality and Infinity is not placed aside, for the movement Levinas makes in the 1960’s is absolutely dependent upon the basic interpretation of the face as that which interrupts the ego and breaks into the ego’s home. Levinas’s post- Totality and Infinity and post-Derrida essays reflect this earlier position when they claim that consciousness “loses its first place” in favor of the order of the other, but because the ego was then already fully involved in the world, a new question could surely arise, one which Levinas did not ask in his first major work:

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<sup>340</sup> Levinas, “Language and Proximity,” 115.

<sup>341</sup> Levinas, “Language and Proximity,” 115, and Otherwise than Being, 7.

“How is the face not simply a true *representation* in which the other renounces his alterity?”<sup>342</sup> What this question suggests is that the analysis of the face’s interruption is phenomenologically accurate, but it does not explain why the ego, temporarily displaced from home, could not simply shore up the rent with a reconstituted home that now includes the other as revealed by the face. The answer to this question is already being suggested in this chapter: the other is not that which breaks into the home but is that which is already there structuring the home in its human manifestation providing, at least in part, the structural meaningfulness of language. If such is the case, then the face of the other does not signify alterity but signifies what Levinas calls the trace of the other.

“A trace signifies beyond being” because it signifies that which is utterly transcendent to consciousness, that which can never be made to appear as present.<sup>343</sup> This definition echoes so much of what was said about the face it is hard to see why a new term is necessary. What is at issue for Levinas and the question posed above appears in Derrida’s essay “. . . that Dangerous Supplement . . .” where “the sign is always the supplement of the thing itself” and the supplement adds its own positivity.<sup>344</sup> The face before a language-ready ego acts as just such a supplement undoing the otherness in the breach of consciousness. What was needed for the self at the moment of primal impression was a word that already implies absence even in its positivity. The very presence of a trace is already the signaling of an irrevocable absence. Nevertheless,

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<sup>342</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “Trace of the Other,” in Deconstruction in Context, trans. Alphonso Lingis, ed. Mark Taylor (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 352.

<sup>343</sup> *Ibid.*, 356.

<sup>344</sup> Jacques Derrida, “. . . That Dangerous Supplement . . .” in Of Grammatology, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), 141-64.

the trace cannot be taken as transcendental, for it does not posit “a world behind our world,” which would run afoul of the architectural metaphor previously mentioned.<sup>345</sup>

An absolute absence of this sort, however, can only be possible if we understand trace in a new temporal light.

The trace of the other, as signified by the face, transcends the previously explicated notions of time. Via Husserl, we have understood time by way of the structure of the now moment which is inextricably tied to a protended future and a retended past. This structure lies behind the synchronic and diachronic nature of time as expressed in language, for it is the ability to present what is in memory to the conscious moment that allows for recognizing what has appeared as an eidetic unity throughout (synchronic) and what has appeared as different (diachronic). The trace, however, does not act in such a way as to make an object appear in the memory such that the synchronicity or diachronicity of the other can be judged. The trace defines that which has already passed before one has arrived on the scene. Herein we find one of Levinas’s classic critiques of Husserl and the entire Western tradition of philosophy, which he claims has always too narrowly relied on presence or the ability to make present for its metaphysics and epistemology. The trace, as absolute absence, exemplifies an immemorial past.

The face, now seen to act as the trace of the other rather than as the coming in of the other, is the “unique openness in which the signifyingness of the transcendent does not nullify the transcendence and make it enter into an immanent *order*; here on the contrary transcendence refuses immanence precisely as the ever bygone transcendence of

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<sup>345</sup> Levinas, “Trace of the Other,” 355.

the transcendent.”<sup>346</sup> Temporality is the immanent order here that the trace escapes, avoiding the possibility of shoring up any breach in consciousness, but it does not escape by being a-temporal but radically dia-chronic. Rather than the traditional understanding of diachrony as something that can be traced through time, the trace signifies that which sounds across time. Having made our ontic reparations in chapter three, we would be tempted to declare the intersubjective as part of the world’s temporal horizon, but recalling Levinas’s assertion that intentional consciousness is at the root of all such ontological disclosures we begin to see the emergence of Levinas’s transcendental argument apart from architectural underpinnings. Ontological disclosure presupposes language as well as a conscious ego, but experiencing the world in its ultimately meaningful way already appears as part and parcel of the human intersubjective as revealed in the Saying/Said distinction. Consequently, Levinas avoids reference to a temporal world horizon in favor of the temporally constituted world of experience which is incapable of placing within historical time the original moment out of which the ego emerges. This case of being acted upon outside of the historically recoverable memorial time reveals within the ego’s hetero-affection a radical passivity of sensibility.

Passivity must first be understood in Husserl’s terms, for it is from his analysis of passive and active syntheses that Levinas takes his beginning. Active synthesis is intricately tied to predicative thinking and so is not far removed from our discussion of the kerygmatic nature of language. Indeed, Don Welton finds it useful to connect active synthesis with Searle’s principle of expressibility which would uncover the varieties of

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<sup>346</sup> Levinas, “Trace of the Other,” 355.



mental acts through an analysis of various speech contexts.<sup>347</sup> However, since the nature of propositional language has already been discussed, we should turn our attention to the manner in which passive synthesis is already, in its own realm, an active synthesis. That a transition occurs suggests that these are not unrelated modes, as the names might suggest. In fact, the explication of passive synthesis begins as easily as active by virtue of the fact that Husserl uses passive synthesis to describe the undergoing of the subject due to the “affective power that perceptual fields exercise on acts of perception.”<sup>348</sup> The subject, as bodily active, “yields” constitutively to original sensations. Conceivably, the impression that affects the passive synthesis of the subject could be ultimately incomprehensible considering that the impression takes place in a pre-reflective moment between perceptual impression and the propositional expression of active synthesis. However, Husserl’s designation of synthesis in both active and passive forms belies another kind of activity. Passive synthesis is the ground for not forgetting what is experienced in the perceptual field that is engendered by this proto-active synthesis. The active work of passive synthesis can be seen in the manner in which this synthesis is already at work in retentional passivity: “an intentional modification in the realm of pure passivity.”<sup>349</sup> Even though retentional passivity does not involve the radiating intentions

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<sup>347</sup> Donn Welton, The Other Husserl (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 186. See also John Searle, Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 19ff.

<sup>348</sup> Edmund Husserl, Experience and Judgement: Investigations in a Genealogy of Logic, trans. James Churchill and Karl Ameriks (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 76.

<sup>349</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

of the ego, the retentional mode still operates “according to an absolutely fixed law.”<sup>350</sup>

The idea that what first affects the ego in the perceptual field can undergo modification in passive retention according to a fixed law actively working in passive synthesis suggests that what is experienced in this pre-egoic moment is recoverable in egoic consciousness. What remains in question for Levinas is whether or not everything passively experienced can be recovered.

The primal impression, as we have seen, lies as the “source-point” of the retention-now-protention field that makes up lived experience. Husserl assumes that the primal impression is recoverable in retention, even after it is modified (contextualized), through a series of reflective acts. This recuperability is precisely what Levinas wishes to challenge:

In Husserl, the time structure of sensibility is the time of the recuperable. That the non-intentionality of the proto-impression is not a loss of consciousness, that nothing can be clandestinely produced, that nothing can break the thread of consciousness, excludes from time the irreducible diachrony whose sense the present study aims to bring to light, behind the exhibiting of a being.<sup>351</sup>

What Levinas wants to claim is that since Husserl revealed the subject as both passively affected and actively constituting, we must not overlook the affected, non-intentional nature of the subject in the primal impression, the non-intentional value of which Husserl overlooks in favor of the ego as active even in its retentional passivity. The very idea of a non-intentional sensation may appear as anathema to most Husserlian readers, and, indeed, we might say that such a reading has “almost” been universally rejected.<sup>352</sup>

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<sup>350</sup> Husserl, Experience and Judgement, 110.

<sup>351</sup> Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 34.

<sup>352</sup> James Dodd, “Phenomenon and Sensation: A Reflection on Husserl’s Concept of *Sinnggebung*,” Man and World 29, no.4 (October 1996), 430n.29.

Levinas's appeal to a non-intentional sensation leans heavily on the ontic-reparations made with chapter three and the idea that Otherwise than Being does not undermine what phenomenological analysis was done in Totality and Infinity. He appears to be making just such a stand when he asserts that the face signifies a sensible that is "in contrast with a phenomenon."<sup>353</sup>

Levinas's argument for the possibility of a non-intentional sensation and the subsequent conditioning of the face as trace of the other remains within his understanding of the primal impression (*Ur-impression*) connected with a fully repaired understanding of the ontic. Within the primal impression, no production occurs on behalf of the subject. The impression "does not spring from anything,"<sup>354</sup> but without production, the impression occurs to an ego that sits freely in what can only be a conceptual moment wherein the subject is open to the givenness of the world: "what is 'there' of itself, and indeed originally: namely, what is pre-given to the Ego, presenting itself to the Ego in the manner of something affecting it as foreign."<sup>355</sup> What Levinas finds important about Husserl's explanation of the pre-given affecting the ego is the manner in which the pre-given is described as foreign, or in Levinas's terms, as other; clearly this is the sense of *autre*. The recovery of that moment, however, is not possible, as we have seen, without the work of retentive passivity, which alludes to a passing of time before the moment becomes meaningful, what Levinas describes as "a first intentional thought that is time

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<sup>353</sup> Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 120.

<sup>354</sup> Edmund Husserl, On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time: Lectures 1893-1918, trans. John Brough (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1991), 106.

<sup>355</sup> Edmund Husserl, Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and a Phenomenological Philosophy: Book Two, trans. Andre Schuwer and Richard Rojcewicz (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1988), 348.

itself, a presence to self across the first gap, an intention in the first lapse of time and the first dispersion.”<sup>356</sup> One’s presence to self across the gap is a presence to that which is already affected by the foreign, already constituted in the horizon of otherness – once again, from the root of *autre*.

We are, however, at this moment ready to turn back to the very beginnings of this chapter to see how Derrida’s proper arrow at the wrong target is dealt with by Levinas. What needs to be explicated is the role the other (*autrui*) plays in the passive attitude of the subject and the extreme limits of retentional passivity’s constitution of the primal impression. Beginning with the latter, the first limit is one oft repeated in this dissertation: one cannot bring to consciousness as an object or phenomenon that which operates in the manner of transcendental horizon. Insofar as we have already seen this result with respect to the radically diachronic, we must now recognize the limit as a constitutive factor of sensibility as well. The open subject passively receives the givenness of the world through its perceptual field, and one can speak of the foundational horizons of meaning as being sensed if we broaden the meaning of sensibility to include all openness to both objects and conditions, but retentional passivity only recovers for consciousness objects as conditioned rather than conditions themselves. Levinas’s methodology of betraying and unsaying the betrayal in a formalistic structure marks the only way in which one may properly “glimpse” these conditions.

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<sup>356</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “Intentionality and Sensation,” in Discovering Existence with Husserl, trans. Richard A. Cohen and Michael B. Smith (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 150. I have followed the change in translation that John Drabinski makes in Sensibility and Singularity, p. 148, translating *écart* as “gap” rather than as “divergence,” which appears in the citation on 150. Gap suggests a break, a reading reinforced by the interval of time that lapses. Divergence presumes a connectedness that would occur immediately and without the traversing of time.

With the end of chapter three and with the previous discussion of the other person in relation to temporality, we have already proposed the possibility that the otherness of the other person disclosed as trace in that person's ontic presence can still operate in the manner of a foundational horizon, but as an ontic incarnation, we have yet to explain in terms of sensibility why the other is not entirely recuperable. Levinas's answer depends upon the broader notion of sensibility as open to object and conditions as well as his insight into Derrida's truest critique of his philosophy. Levinas moves to address in "Language and Proximity" what he sees to be the real threat to his work from Derrida. Putting together the entire force of his arguments from sensibility, temporality, and passivity, he claims: "there is a consciousness which is a passive work of time, with a passivity more passive still than any passivity that is simply antithetical to activity, a passivity without reserve, the passivity of a creature at the time of creation *when there is no subject to assume the creative act.*"<sup>357</sup> This thought culminates Levinas's addition to Husserl's analysis of the primal impression and his shoring up of his own philosophy against meaningful ontological critique. Husserl's passivity tends to assert the ability of an ego to make sense out of the entire milieu of conditioned phenomena as though the ego is entirely capable of giving meaning to phenomena when, in fact, the ego itself is simultaneously emerging as a conditioned being in the field of consciousness. The emerging ego must be parsed out in terms of its many originary layers, no longer under Derrida's onus of justifying an assumed ontology, as it is conditioned in terms of absolute horizons as investigated by the likes of Heidegger and Fink as well as in terms

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<sup>357</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, "Language and Proximity," in Collected Philosophical Papers, ed. and trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), 114.

of semi-recoverable horizons such as Merleau-Ponty's corporality and finally Levinas's intersubjectivity.

What serves to set Levinas's analysis apart from the others is his assertion that within the intersubjective layer lies the beginning of the human itself. The very presence of the other person's otherness affects the subject in a way that conditions the emerging ego to meaningfully interpret the world in a way that is first and foremost ethical, all of which inevitably brings us back to our discussion of language. The Saying of language, occurring in the initial openness of the emerging subject, presents the uninitiated ego to a world of exposure, as a result of which through its exposure the ego is called to response. The Saying operates on the level of the primal impression when there is no subject as the non-recoverable origin of the Said. Confronted by the face of another, hearing the Said, awakens us to responsibility – not initiating responsibility – but awakening the subject to that which has always already held the self. The Saying of the intersubjective milieu establishes proximity and responsibility between the self and the other such that the subject is already accused, called out to be one for the other.

Our analysis of the ego's emergence into a milieu of the intersubjective would certainly re-appropriate Heidegger's analysis of *Mitsein* for a more fundamental constituent of human-being-in-the-world. It is not simply the existential fact that we are with others but that we are already called to respond to the other, the very force of such a call originating at the core of the ego itself. Insofar as the call conditions without content, specific moral actions cannot be determined at this level, but certain characteristics of the call can be described. The call to response, the call to place oneself in the place of another originates from a time one cannot make present and a sensible one cannot reach

out and touch and a face one cannot count as phenomenon. Every aspect of the call is ungraspable by the subject but is always grasping the subject. In this way, we might begin to see why the fundamental ethical command is infinite in its origination.

### **Substitution as Phenomenological Construction for Infinite Origination**

Because Levinas's philosophy is so often associated with ethics, the responsibility opened up by the Saying seems to indicate the responsibility of a subject involved in ethics, but a direct correlation between the two is expressly denied: "The ethical situation of responsibility is not comprehensible on the basis of ethics."<sup>358</sup> Apparently, what is ethical about the responsibility exposed in communication is a situation, which can only be the site out of which the ego originates. Levinas's pointing again and again to the immemorial time and structure at the origin of the ego will finally necessitate a description of this very origin in itself. "Language and Proximity" was already preparing the way for the beginnings of this attempt which he makes in his 1967 lecture in Brussels entitled, "Substitution." This lecture was slightly revised for publication the following year but received a greater re-tooling and expansion as the "centerpiece" of Otherwise than Being. Therein, Levinas repeats the discussion of language, the Saying/Said distinction, and the responsibility inherent in communication, but this only leads to the idea of one being first and foremost constituted as "one-for-the-other," as substitution.

"Substitution" as a philosophical piece contains several oddities that help it to stand out beyond its obvious placement in Levinas's second major work. While references to God and neighbor have often reminded readers of theology, Levinas always made a strong effort to distance his philosophical work from his theological and

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<sup>358</sup> Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 120.

confessional writings. “Substitution” however not only carries these reminders but boldly offers an array of unexpected vocabulary, e.g. “hostage” and “persecution,” which would appear quite at home in a religious context. In fact, in order to find the first instance of substitution as a concept for Levinas, one would have to look into his confessional writings on the Talmud.

Levinas introduces the religiously reminiscent vocabulary with the clear intent of avoiding a language of traditional ontology, a move we have already explicated with respect to his use of the term God; however, expansion of the phenomenologically questionable vocabulary is evidence of more than a fully expected critique but of a discomfort between Levinas and his own work. Greater attempts to distance oneself from ontology only reveal the fear that past attempts were simply not enough. At issue is Levinas’s effort at making “Substitution” his final word on the realization of Derrida’s real threat to his philosophy with the result that there would, under Derrida’s reading, remain “no interior difference, no fundamental and autochthonous alterity within the ego.”<sup>359</sup> With so much work having already been done to show that the other appears at work already at the emergence of the ego, evidence can be found in Levinas’s early and late version of “Substitution” that suggests his fear of an activity at work behind the self’s passive openness: “how can the passivity of the self become a ‘hold on oneself’?”

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<sup>359</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 109. One might conclude that the referenced quote and the pages following it in Derrida’s essay constitute the very critique of the ego that was dismissed in the first pages of this chapter; however, Derrida does not make this any real object of critique but the linchpin of agreement with Levinas. If it is the case that one cannot truly escape the ontological in philosophical discourse, it clearly shows in the fact that the ego is at one moment ontologically constructed and must share that ontological construction with the other who must first be viewed as an other-me.



Leaving aside a play on words, does this not presuppose an activity, a hidden and clandestine freedom?”<sup>360</sup> It could certainly be argued that this question holds only rhetorical value with the expectation that the answer will be “no” and that Levinas will be explaining the difficulty away in a matter of moments. The reason for arguing that this question acts as something more than a device is in the difference between the early and late version of the text that follows the question. The greatest amount of reworking done to the first essay comes here.

“Substitution” as either a concept or essay apparently comes with a lot of confusion at the very moment in both Levinas’s career and this dissertation that one would hope for the greatest clarity. This confusion prompted Robert Bernasconi to write for the Cambridge Companion to Levinas an essay entitled, “What is the Question to which ‘Substitution’ is the Answer?” In his essay he recounts even more difficulties surrounding this idea and preliminarily answers his Jeopardy style question with, “what is the most obscure philosophical concept of the twentieth century?”<sup>361</sup> Clearly, little to nothing is clear, and this can be the result of fuzzy thinking or the production of something extraordinarily difficult – of the two, the latter being the case. Let us undertake to comprehend how our own research into Levinas’s philosophy as a study in infinite origination necessarily leads to the concept of substitution. We will begin with a short definition of the concept, continue with Bernasconi’s question wherein we will have

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<sup>360</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “Substitution,” in Basic Philosophical Writings, ed. Adriaan Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 89. Similar wording reappears in Otherwise than Being, 113.

<sup>361</sup> Robert Bernasconi, “What is the Question to which ‘Substitution’ is the Answer?” in The Cambridge Companion to Levinas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 238.

to modify his answer with an extra bit of explication of phenomenology's transcendental method, and end with the infinite as originative of the human as human.

### **Substitution is What?**

Sometimes the first formulation of a concept is the clearest, standing as it does without mountains of clarification to cloud the idea. In this case, going back to the first appearance of substitution would lead us to Levinas's Nine Talmudic Readings, which we have generally avoided for reasons outlined in chapter two. However, we have here a special case, for Levinas breaks his interpretation in "The Temptation of Temptation" to end with "a few *philosophical considerations*, either inspired by this commentary or which inspired the commentary in the first place" (italics mine).<sup>362</sup>

The Talmudic commentary in "The Temptation of Temptation" concludes with a description of uprightness and the man of integrity, Jacob. The sudden break into philosophical considerations brings the beginning of a phenomenology into the very essence of this uprightness, no longer simply alluding to it by way of deduction from other phenomena. Such a description is admittedly speculative, and the short nature of the discussion at the end makes clear that the real work is yet to come, but it is here that the first formulation is produced:

The ego's exit from being occurs before the ego-which-decides. This exit is not accomplished through a game without consequences played in some corner of being in which the ontological warp is loose. It happens through the weight exerted on one point of being by the rest of its substance. This weight is called responsibility. Responsibility for the creature – a being of which the ego was not the author – which establishes the ego. To be a self is to be responsible beyond what one has oneself done. *Temimut* consists in substituting oneself for others.<sup>363</sup>

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<sup>362</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, "The Temptation of Temptation," in Nine Talmudic Readings, trans. Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 48.

<sup>363</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

The first line is reminiscent of our discussion of Existence and Existents, for the ego's exit from being is not death but birth, an ontic instantiation that must be considered in its own right distinct from ontological being if not apart from it. Problematic to the issue of the ego's birth is that such an event is not available to the ego for reflection. There is no ego that can view its own emergence; consequently, Levinas begins to use creature and creation freely in his philosophical work. The creature references the fact that the human being is constructed even if the human cannot recall its own beginning. With these impossibilities in mind, it must be the case that the ego-which-decides does not decide to exist but is the product of that which is other than it. The emergence of a being, according to Levinas's quick explanation here, occurs when the rest of being's substance exerts "weight" on a single point. An ego, then, comes about within ontological possibility and the decision of beings to create and let be the new subject. The new being, by virtue of its existence, owes a debt, bears the weight of responsibility to that which the new creation was not an author. The creature arises in place of all that which moved aside to let it be; the creature stands as substitute, one for the other, one for all that allowed it to be. Substitution, the very situation of responsibility, establishes the ego.

Levinas's formulation of substitution dares to undermine the logical premise of  $A=A$ . In essence, the ego-which-decides cannot be identical with its essence, for its essence is always, first and foremost, the other. In an attempt to explain the difficulty of this concept, Levinas borrows a phrase from Arthur Rimbaud: "Je est un autre."<sup>364</sup> In

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<sup>364</sup> For Levinas's use see Emmanuel Levinas, "Substitution," 92. For the original quote see Arthur Rimbaud, Illuminations and Other Prose Poems, trans. Louise Varèse (New York: New Directions, 1957), xxvii.

Rimbaud's case, he uses the phrase to suggest alienation in the self wherein the self experiences a reflexive foreignness or betrayal. Levinas, on the other hand, twists the meaning to offer a definition for substitution, an explanation for how a person can have an identity without identifying with the self. He explains in his 1970 essay, "Without Identity," that it is not the betrayal of self he seeks but the idea of a "subjectivity incapable of shutting itself up."<sup>365</sup> Undoubtedly, the self must always be itself, but at root, the whole of creation plays an originaive role in the self's creation.

### **Substitution as Transcendental Construction**

Explicating substitution in terms of a transcendental argument should be well expected after the constant stream of exploring the problematic of describing an originaive horizon after fully understanding substitution as that fundamental structure that makes ethics possible.<sup>366</sup> There should also be a level of comfort to continue with such a reading after having alleviated Levinas's own fears concerning the transcendental as just another architectural foundation. However, credible readers of Levinas, like Peperzak and Derrida, seem to caution against transcendental interpretations without in fact declaring a transcendental reading to be out of bounds. Derrida on the one hand gives a brief transcendental reading in Adieu, while asking if Levinas could in fact mean such a thing.<sup>367</sup> One would expect that Derrida's reluctance is comparable to Levinas's own cautions against transcendental theory with the express worry that such philosophy

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<sup>365</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, "Without Identity," in Collected Philosophical Papers, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 151.

<sup>366</sup> For one example of this argument see Simon Critchley, "The Original Traumatism: Levinas and Psychoanalysis," in Ethics-Politics-Subjectivity (London: Verso, 1999), 183-97.

<sup>367</sup> Jacques Derrida, Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas, trans. P.A. Brault and M. Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 150-1.

could only end up in ontology. Adriaan Peperzak echoes the same cautions but attempts to alleviate the problem with the claim that transcendental method in Levinas's philosophy is neither "founding, planning, and constructing."<sup>368</sup> Any such notions of founding must inevitably lead, for Peperzak, to some kind of ontological egoism.

Peperzak's caution arises from his association of transcendental theory with the most basic form of Husserl's phenomenology in that anything transcendentially described must be done from the position of a reduced or foundational consciousness. Avoiding this pitfall while maintaining anything like transcendental theory requires that "one should disregard its connection to a transcendental and foundational consciousness."<sup>369</sup> A phenomenology that arises from a foundational consciousness must be, for Peperzak, egoistic and, consequently, tied to ontology. Anything like a transcendental argument in Levinas, he claims, is better understood along the lines of intentional analysis, which we have seen as Levinas's favored Husserlian insight.

Peperzak's reliance on a "more modest and less suggestive" intentional analysis, however, appears to overlook Levinas's clear understanding that consciousness "is" intentionality. As a result, any transcendental methodology that revolves around intentionality still holds to a phenomenology of consciousness. What relieves the pressure of Levinas simply creating another egoistic interpretation is the progression of his phenomenology from Totality and Infinity to Otherwise than Being wherein the ego first appears unquestioned in the first work but is reanalyzed in the second to find the ego already emerging from an originary intersubjective milieu such that consciousness

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<sup>368</sup> Adriaan Peperzak, To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1993), 232.

<sup>369</sup> Ibid.

cannot exist as a separate singularity. This suggests that as long as we can connect Levinas's philosophy to the late work of Husserl and the transcendental method of Fink, we can feel secure that Levinas's understanding of phenomenology can surpass Husserl's early methodology wherein the foundational ego appeared as an unassailable monolith at the origin of phenomena. What inevitably keeps one worried about placing Levinas within a tradition of transcendental methodology seems to be that once we go beyond the simple origination of the human by the world's weight and ask in what way the letting be of the self by others (*autrui*) affects the subject, a worry arises about the link between the transcendental condition of the intersubjective and the concrete expression of ethics.

Theodore de Boer, who has been a long-suffering voice for Levinas as transcendental philosopher, clearly fears a transcendental theory that would somehow divorce Levinas's philosophy from the world of ethics, when he says "I am not 'constituted' by the Other."<sup>370</sup> A theory of constitution, even if not grounded in a singular ego, runs the danger of being nothing more than a formalism that, once expressed, can be divorced from life in the same way that Levinas has already suggested a separation between existence and the existent. Bernasconi resonates with this problem when discussing substitution as the possibility of both ethics and sacrifice. It is clear that Levinas does not say that one should sacrifice or that every event with another is an ethical or sacrificial one, only that the possibility of such exists on account of substitution, but this leads Bernasconi to ask with some trepidation whether or not "this

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<sup>370</sup> Theodore de Boer, The Rationality of Transcendence (Amsterdam: J.C. Gieben, 1997), 31.

exhausts the positive doctrine of ‘Substitution.’”<sup>371</sup> Levinas’s transcendental method, then, must not only avoid a central, unmolested ego but must also keep its relevance to the ontic situation of ethical encounters. This is, in fact, possible if we understand Levinas’s transcendental methodology to be constructive in a sense analogous to Fink’s introduction of the term in The Sixth Cartesian Meditation.

One can make direct connections between Fink and Levinas, for it is clear that the latter has read The Sixth Cartesian Meditation and is familiar with Husserl’s manuscripts, much of which gave Fink his direction. The direct link, however, still finds Levinas leveling some of the same criticisms against Fink that he held for Husserl; whether these criticisms can be legitimately transferred from teacher to student should not concern us here.<sup>372</sup> To find the real connection between Fink and Levinas which could produce an appreciation for transcendental theory, one must follow the indirect link through Merleau-Ponty. Merleau-Ponty’s mature work reflects both his readings of Fink’s published essays as well as a personal meeting in 1939.<sup>373</sup> In contrast to most of Levinas’s critique of the founding phenomenologists, he rarely has a critical word for Merleau-Ponty. In fact, in those cases in which he addresses Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology directly, he never makes the case for overturning the impressive analysis

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<sup>371</sup> Bernasconi, “What is the Question to which ‘Substitution’ is the Answer?” 235.

<sup>372</sup> For example, see Levinas’s remarks in “Phenomenology,” in Discovering Existence with Husserl, trans. Richard A. Cohen and Michael B. Smith (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 41-42.

<sup>373</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty directly references Fink in his preface to the Phenomenology of Perception, trans. Colin Smith (New York: Routledge, 1962), vii. See also Ronald Bruzina, “Eugen Fink and Maurice Merleau-Ponty: The Philosophical Lineage in Phenomenology,” in Merleau-Ponty’s Reading of Husserl, ed. Lester Embree and Ted Toadvine (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001).

of the body and perception.<sup>374</sup> As might be expected, Levinas desires to expand the description of the body into realms of the intersubjective and ethical, but he goes so far in accepting Merleau-Ponty as to state his agreement with the transcendental nature of the body.<sup>375</sup> This acceptance not only supports seeing the ontic other as constitutive in part of the self's transcendental origin, but it also defines the methodology of Otherwise than Being with respect to the phenomenological construction of the horizon of the ego.

The discomfort shown by Levinas, Derrida, Peperzak, and even, though to a lesser extent, Bernasconi concerning a transcendental understanding of substitution can be alleviated by following the proposals given by Merleau-Ponty for his Phenomenology of Perception as presented in the "Preface." Ultimately, whether these cautionary voices fear an ontological absolute within the transcendental, an egological absolute at the beginning of exegesis, or an irrelevancy between the transcendental and the world of ethics, all these fears arise out of the general interpretation of transcendental theory as described in the 1930's, Fink excluded. The layout of the Phenomenology of Perception begins undermining this view with the idea that the eidetic sense of experience arises out of a horizontal framework of pre-reflective experiences, which is the very goal of the analysis.<sup>376</sup> The term framework, however, is still too reminiscent of Levinas's

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<sup>374</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, "In Memory of Alphonse de Waelhens," in Outside the Subject, trans. Michael B. Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994).

<sup>375</sup> Levinas's comment on the body and subsequently on culture as "less innocently" transcendental comes during a statement on Husserl's methodology. While Husserl has interesting analyses of corporality, Levinas's familiarity with the body as transcendental would undoubtedly be through Merleau-Ponty. Emmanuel Levinas, "Signature," in Difficult Freedom, trans. Seán Hand (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 292.

<sup>376</sup> Merleau-Ponty, "Preface," in Phenomenology of Perception, vii-xi, xvii-xviii, xx-xxi.



architectural concerns. However, the process of realizing the framework cannot consist in achieving an absolutely reduced state, for such a state would surely violate the very nature of phenomenology's description of lived experience, which determines the subject as always part of an ongoing process of further engagement with the world. The result of this determines that any reduction must be without a fully disclosed telos, since the reduction itself must rely on the experience of an ever happening engagement with objects in the world upon which its reflections are based.<sup>377</sup> The determination of a transcendental cannot be absolutely made, then, for more reasons than simply being unable to take up a position outside the constitutive horizon but because the unfolding of experience can always bring about a heretofore unrealized permutation of the transcendental in the living subject. The process of reduction must be an ongoing recovery of a condition that is always being revealed and is always imbuing the world as experienced with potentiality, effectively undermining any understanding of the reduction as that which delivers anything absolutely. In addition, the very nature of the development of the horizon in the lived experience of the individual determines an absolute relevancy between the ontic experience, ethical case in Levinas's instance, and the horizontal frame.

If we read Levinas with an eye towards Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological method, then we are able to correct Bernasconi's correction of how to appropriately read Levinas's discussion of substitution. Bernasconi willingly keeps the idea of substitution as a transcendental or perhaps quasi-transcendental but refuses to allow the reading if the methodology does nothing more than a transcendental deduction to an empty *a priori*

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<sup>377</sup> Merleau-Ponty, "Preface," xi-xvii, xxi.

discovered in but subsequently severed from concrete experience. He positively claims that “if one asks how sacrifice or giving is possible, one will ultimately be led behind consciousness and knowing to the one-for-the-other of substitution, but his [Levinas’s] thought remains directed toward the concrete.”<sup>378</sup> This comment suggests that Bernasconi sees a disconnect between transcendental methodology and considerations of the ethical situation. In addition to the disclosure of substitution as transcendental, there must also be the question of the taking place of substitution for, indeed, “substitution happens. In some sense it has already happened. But in so far as this is so, then this radically alters the meaning of the transcendental question.”<sup>379</sup> Unfortunately, this last quote comes at the end of the essay, leaving many readers to wonder how the transcendental question is radically altered. What new ground has Levinas broken in seeing a radical intertwining of transcendental analysis and concrete experience such that the mark of substitution on the human ego reaches not only into the originary structure of the subject but into the milieu of ethical possibility from which the realization of the transcendental not only arises but continually comes into actualization? The answer is that Levinas has broken no new ground at all, but is firmly situated within a methodology of phenomenological construction which realizes the ongoing event in which “substitution happens” with the result that substitution is not deduced but properly constructed with an eye not on the final telos but on the possibility of an ever better description of such telos.

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<sup>378</sup> Bernasconi, “What is the Question to which ‘Substitution’ is the Answer?” 248.

<sup>379</sup> *Ibid.*, 250.

If we return to Levinas's attempt to disclose the full impact of the passive moment in which the subject emerges as an ego, it is clear that the phenomenology done is not a simple work done in immanent reflection. Because the nature of hetero-affection that occurs in absolute passivity is to be precisely *arche* and condition for conscious experience, it does not occur within the conscious experience, and, as we see now, cannot be absolutely deduced as the origin from observation of conditioned phenomena. The formal description to be offered to indicate the human horizon will not simply be metaphorical in the sense that what may have been deduced is simply akin to some other knowable condition, but the description is *given* as a guiding idea to direct future analyses. The given name for the condition, however, cannot come from limited involvement with immanent reflection or ungrounded guesswork but must emerge as descriptive of what has been indicated in phenomenological investigation.<sup>380</sup> Consequently, we must see Levinas's attempt at describing an ethical horizon as the most general of guiding ideas, further illuminated in the ontic condition of the face-to-face, further radicalized in the condition of the self as responsibility via the immanent reflection of language as communication, and finally recast as the very act of substitution – the self as originatively one-for-the-other.

Substitution, as the newly constructed guiding principle for the very origin of the ego, displays its intertwining of transcendental condition of the ego and the very development of the ego's sense-bestowal to the intentionally realized world (i.e., as that which is played out in the concrete). As transcendently originative, Levinas asserts that

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<sup>380</sup> Ronald Bruzina, "Construction in Phenomenology," in The Reach of Reflection: Issues for Phenomenology's Second Century, eds. Steven Crowell, Lester Embree, and Samuel J. Julian (Boca Raton: Electron Press, 2001), 54.

“the self is the sub-jectum; it is under the weight of the universe, responsible for all.”<sup>381</sup>

Sub-ject, then, etymologically describes the nature of the self as having been thrown under, in this case thrown under the world by the world, a reiteration of what was discovered in the description of language toward responsibility. However, as under the world, the subject necessarily supports the world, so that responsibility becomes the condition for “beings” – not only in the manner of their phenomenality but, humanly speaking, in the manner of their ethicality. The origin for Levinas now appears clearly as origination in terms of the good rather than in terms of being: “the self is goodness, or under the exigency of an abandon of all having, of all one’s own and all for oneself, to the point of substitution.”<sup>382</sup>

In the passive subject, the ethical self originates in passivity, summoned before conscious thematization, and thus in a time before conscious time. Originating, then, before the arrival of consciousness and active intentionality, the constituting role of consciousness does not affect the responsible self, for it is always, already there. Consequently, before consciousness, the ethical self is irreversibly affected by the other in the intersubjective milieu, called without consent of the subject, ordered “without asking myself: What then is it to me? Where does he get his right to command? What have I done to be from the start in debt?”<sup>383</sup> With consciousness being that very part of the self capable of activity but unable to hold responsibility in its grasp, substitution, as origin of responsibility, must therefore be primal.

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<sup>381</sup> Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 116.

<sup>382</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>383</sup> Ibid., 87.

The irreversibility of the affected self prior to consciousness keeps the ethical origin from ever showing in the present. It is always late, remaining in an immemorial past, which is another way of saying that substitution acts as the ultimate horizon of the I. So founded, the self is “anachronously delayed behind its present moment and unable to recuperate this delay.”<sup>384</sup> Because the present moment of consciousness is always after the self, which has been summoned in affectivity, thus never present to consciousness, immanent reflection is unable to make up the temporal lapse between the summons and knowing self. Consciousness has already lost the proximity of the other in responsibility, so where there is consciousness, responsibility has been forgotten.<sup>385</sup> Therefore, the moment of identity born from substitution is always an-archival with respect to consciousness. This means that the arche principles of appearing phenomena which govern conscious awareness are preceded by an arche that can never be made present in the synchronic/diachronic temporality of the conscious self (thus an an-arche). The result of this belatedness and immemorial responsibility is that the self is never fully present to assume the tasks to which it has been summoned; the other affects me without my awareness – my present comes too late. Coming too late, then, leaves me unable to respond and accused for my lateness as Levinas claims, “my presence does not respond to the extreme urgency of the assignation. I am accused of having delayed.”<sup>386</sup>

Substitution is more, though, than the call to be responsible to the other; it is one-for-the-other, which will demand that one be responsible for the responsibilities of the

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<sup>384</sup> Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 101.

<sup>385</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>386</sup> Ibid., 89.

other as well. Levinas often illustrates this point with reference to Dostoevsky's The Brothers Karamazov: "every one of us is guilty before all, for everyone and everything, and I more than others."<sup>387</sup> As Levinas's new guiding principle, substitution allows interpreters interested in the concrete aspects of his philosophy to address even what Simon Critchley has called his Achilles heel, politics, by substitution's connection with justice and the entire community of the intersubjective. The ethical relation revealed in the face exhibited an asymmetry in the summons. The accused subject owes everything, meaning that if there could possibly be oneself and one other person, everything would be owed to the other. This hypothetical duality, however, simply cannot account for the call of justice when the other is accompanied, bringing a third into the relation. The third, or any multiple of others, do not even need to be present to disrupt the ethical asymmetry in favor of justice, for the face already implies the intersubjective milieu. Substitution not only retains the asymmetry of the face to face, but the placing of oneself for the other engages the self in an asymmetrical relation with all: "no one can substitute himself for me, who substitutes myself for all."<sup>388</sup> Crossing the temporal gap and shouldering the world's responsibility becomes the self's infinite task. This task reveals the infinity in the very nature of the finite subject.

To this point, our description of the self's nature as substitution has relied upon the infinite without explicitly naming it as origin. The horizontal ground for

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<sup>387</sup> Fyodor Dostoyevsky, The Brothers Karamazov, trans. D. Magarshack, vol. 1 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), 339. The translation given reflects Levinas's rendering of the text. The English version reads: "every one of us is responsible for everyone else in every way, and I most of all." For Levinas's use, see "Truth of Disclosure and Truth of Testimony" and "God and Philosophy," in Basic Philosophical Writings (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 102 and 144 respectively.

<sup>388</sup> Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 136.

consciousness lies in the infinite as condition for human emergence as ethical. Totality and Infinity suggests an infinity behind the face of the other person, as though the advent of the other initiates the infinite. While this reading is alluring and easily made due to the confusion between the face as seemingly both concrete and transcendental, it must be resisted. Even as early as Totality and Infinity, Levinas references Descartes's description of the infinite overflowing the subject. This would intimate that even in this early work, Levinas at least had an idea that the infinite condition might be realized in the subject rather than, one-sidedly, through the otherness of the face. What the approach of the other person does, then, is open the conscious subject to the realization of excess, confirming the subject's relation with the infinite horizon. The encounter with the other, then, is evidence of the binding between self and infinity. The face, consequently, signifies as ethical because it orients the self to an excess of consciousness, which has already shown to subject the subject in infinite responsibility, the result of the interplay of self and other in the intersubjective.

Levinas's connection to Descartes and infinity assumes a particular understanding of infinity as well as Descartes's concept of God. Infinity, revealed as the face in a simple sense but also as responsibility and ethical demand in its originary sense, must be connected to transcendence insofar as any historical comprehension of infinity without transcendence once again involves the problematic of totality. For example, an infinity without limits but without transcendence would be akin to a being with no other, as is Spinoza's God, the "absolutely infinite being." As a result, all that is is in infinite being, the same *par excellence*. The opposition over such a being follows Kant's move to describe the finite in other terms than the negation of the infinite such that the infinite

becomes a regulative idea, which Levinas claims “illuminates the infinite horizon on which the [finite] datum appears.”<sup>389</sup> This concept grows through Husserl’s idea of the origivative temporal horizon to Heidegger’s horizon of horizons. The transcendental horizon of the human as human endeavors to retain the move away from an infinite being without falling prey to the same mistakes Levinas finds in Heidegger’s ontology. This he achieves with the help, once again, of Descartes’s discussion of the infinite and God.

As we already saw in chapter two, Descartes’s description of the infinite was helpful for Levinas in his attempt to describe the way in which the other person is not simply reducible to another me. However, as the phenomenology has forced a reanalysis of the ethical condition, it is possible that the earlier comparison is no longer applicable, but Levinas retains the analogy of the ethical infinite and Descartes’s philosophy, only updating the way in which the infinite now appears as the unending, ethical task origivative of the human. God, for Descartes, represents an idea that overflows consciousness; the essence of this concept has not been given up by Levinas and remains central to both the earlier reading as well as the later reading. The first shift arises in the necessity of associating infinity with transcendence, which could be difficult in a simple relating of infinity with the face for all the ontic-ontological reasons previously discussed. Levinas finds Descartes’s notion of the infinite as close to the idea of transcendence when Descartes declares that “I conceive God as actually infinite in so high a degree that nothing can be added to the sovereign perfection which he

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<sup>389</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “Infinity,” in *Alterity and Transcendence*, trans. Michael B. Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 73.



possesses.”<sup>390</sup> This statement suggests transcendence in the sense that there is a qualitative difference of degree between God and whatever might be added to the very idea of God such that God’s infinite perfection is disconnected from any relation to ontic data in part or as a whole such that the infinite collection of data would constitute the infinite. One might expect that the disconnection severs any possibility of a recognizable relation with this infinite, but Descartes declares the opposite, as does Levinas, in that the infinite affects the individual absolutely. Thus Descartes claims, “I have never treated the infinite except to submit to it, at no point to determine what it is or what it is not.”<sup>391</sup> Pulling both transcendence and submission together, we finally have full evidence and descriptive vocabulary for explaining precisely what it is Levinas is shooting at: the self, in certain situational structurings, specifically the intersubjective milieu grounded in the face-to-face, is transcendently conditioned to encounter the world as ethically meaningful in such a way that every human interaction originates, develops, and submits in the ethical, which imposes an infinite task upon the self calling forth the human as human.

Once again, we should give due warning that God, as an object of investigation, has been ruled out, and the manner in which God acts as the infinite against which the finite cogito is defined for Descartes has been reinterpreted. Truly, Blum’s assertion at the beginning of this chapter that Levinas’s ethico-religious concerns cannot be carried through after Otherwise than Being appears a plausible outcome, but we must, of course, rephrase the claim, after having shown in chapter two that Levinas did not have ethico-

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<sup>390</sup> Here, Levinas is quoting from Descartes, Meditations, III. See Discourse on Method and the Meditations (New York: Penguin Classics, 1968), 126.

<sup>391</sup> René Descartes, Ouvres et Lettres (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1953), 1111.

religious concerns in his earlier work, to say that Levinas's reinterpreting of religious language and traditional accounts for God appear to make any ethico-religious connection implausible. Truly, one might ask along with Bruzina, "How in principle could the Deus Absconditus be accessible?" He further adds for justification, "In that, such a deity fits with the meontic as a critical device, it seems to me that the whole methodology of the intelligibility of the meontic, the 'logos hamartikos,' precludes there being any comfort in that situation. It is utterly 'a-theic,' in any of the sense that religion wishes 'theos' to possess. In short, faith in a 'theos' cannot be rational and may not be intelligible."<sup>392</sup> Nevertheless, even as the subject's origination derives from the infinite task set forth in the irreducibility of the interpersonal to any sort of objective limits, the discourse appears relatable to both the philosophical and religious traditions' discussion of the infinite. To this point Levinas ponders whether or not his philosophy "is not drawing close to that [religious] tradition, even when it expresses itself in a deliberately and rigorously atheistic way."<sup>393</sup>

### **Levinas, the Human, and the Holy**

Among present day philosophers, few have inspired students of both the philosophical and theological schools as has Emmanuel Levinas. While we have attempted to show that Levinas properly sits within the tradition of phenomenology, at times arguing that his work be considered as "rigorously atheistic" even while making reference to God, it is important to note that his philosophical work has influenced a host of religiously minded thinkers like Jean-Luc Marion and Michel Henry in France, Roger

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<sup>392</sup> Ronald Bruzina, "Re: Plodding ever Plodding," email to the author, 3 April 2006.

<sup>393</sup> Levinas, "Infinity," 76.

Burggraeve in Belgium, and John Caputo and Merrold Westphal in the United States to name a few. Even though we have had occasion to note his deep and abiding devotion to Judaism, he has deeply affected Christian thinkers as well, speaking during the Week of Catholic Intellectuals, an event held in Paris in April 1968, on the subject of “A Man-God?”<sup>394</sup> Of course, Levinas has never distanced himself from matters of religion, only his properly phenomenological work from such matters, but what refuels interest between his philosophy and theology are some of his later comments that admits of a possible connection. Levinas writes in the preface to the second edition of Of God Who Comes to Mind:

We have been reproached for ignoring theology; and we do not contest the necessity of a recovery, at least, the necessity of choosing an opportunity for a recovery of these themes. We think, however, that theological recuperation comes after the glimpse of holiness, which is primary.<sup>395</sup>

What remains to be argued in connection to the infinite as originative of the human as human is the way in which this origination is that opportunity for the glimpsing of holiness.

Once again, we are reminded of those like Janicaud who would quickly douse any zealous fire that might arise from the phenomenological method he deems to be relegated to rigorous science without God, but instead of delving again into those arguments, let us pause for Husserl’s own positive words on the subject: “In spite of everything, I once

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<sup>394</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “A Man-God?,” in Entre Nous, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 53-60. The essay presented was originally published under the title of “*Qui est Jésus-Christ?*” in Editions Desclée de Brouwer.

<sup>395</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “Preface to the Second Edition,” in Of God Who Comes to Mind, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), ix.

believed – today it is more than belief, today it is knowledge – that exactly my phenomenology, and it alone, is *the* philosophy that the Church can use because it converges with Thomism and extends Thomistic philosophy.”<sup>396</sup> Prima facie, the statement is almost unbelievable; however, the further link given by Husserl in the quoted conversation that follows Aquinas back to Aristotle at least indicates Husserl has not taken leave of his phenomenological senses. Aquinas asks in the Summa Theologiae (I, q. 84, a. 7) whether one can understand anything using only the species one has without turning to the senses, and he answers, “It is impossible for our intellect, in its present state of being joined to a body capable of receiving impressions, actually to understand anything without turning to sense images.” Such a statement sounds strikingly similar to Aristotle’s method of discerning the form through the particular instances of perception of material objects. All of this would corroborate our earlier connection in chapter one between Husserl’s epistemological program for phenomenology and the ancient works of Aristotle. What ultimately connects Aristotle, Aquinas, Husserl, and “*the* philosophy that the Church can use” is the relationship between phenomenality and revealed theology. As Marion writes, “the question of God is played out as much in the dimension of immanence as that of transcendence.”<sup>397</sup> If we accept theology as something more than theoretical conceptualizations about the Deus Absconditus and recognize it in the very least as humanity’s opening up to the question of God and at the most humanity’s very

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<sup>396</sup> Adelgundis Jaegerschmid, “Conversations with Edmund Husserl, 1931-1938,” in The New Yearbook for Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy I (Seattle: Noesis Press, 2001), 338.

<sup>397</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 28.

relationship with God revealed, then there must be a phenomenal character to this opening which belongs “rightfully to phenomenology, since revelation itself claims to deploy a particular figure of phenomenality.”<sup>398</sup>

Even if phenomenology and theology are not necessarily in opposition, as the claims to revealed religion would argue, it is important to note that Levinas does not then simply dive into the depths of theology but, rather, only seeks an “opportunity” to recover theology’s themes, which would be first a recovery of holiness. Any and all such recovery must be done in lived experience, which on Levinas’s account is ethically meaningful on account of the human’s origination in the infinite. Consequently, whatever theological move one wishes to make, the move must first be meaningfully conditioned as ethical (i.e., first theology is first philosophy, which is ethics). Richard Cohen makes this point nicely when he reads Levinas’s intent even in his Talmudic interpretations as offering a new humanism.<sup>399</sup> The ethical is first and foremost human access into a world not dominated by the self; it is one’s opening up and the only theological opportunity for which Levinas can be looking. In “Loving the Torah more than God,” this very order of approaching the divine or the holy is made explicit. One loves God’s law more because it is through the doing of the law that any access to God is possible, but the law is clearly understood as bringing about contact between the human and God only through the prescription of doing ethical service to others. In addition, lest we believe that these arguments are not at least mentioned in Levinas’s philosophical

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<sup>398</sup> Marion, *In Excess*, 29.

<sup>399</sup> Richard Cohen, “Introduction,” in *New Talmudic Readings* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1999), 2.

works, he clearly argues in Totality and Infinity that “without the signification they draw from ethics theological concepts remain empty and formal frameworks.”<sup>400</sup>

We can see this very concern for desiring a full theological concept when we look at Levinas’s short essay on the Christian idea of an incarnate God entitled, “A Man-God?” What is even more interesting than Levinas’s willingness to discuss the very idea of Jesus as divine, a belief which he willingly admits to his Christian audience that he does not share, is the manner in which he approaches the subject phenomenologically with the very eye to the way in which his philosophy brings light to the paradoxical idea. For a Christian, the title is the first indication of something theologically unusual, for Christian theology typically prefers the term “God-Man” when referring to Jesus. This solidly reflects Levinas’s idea that “the idea of God is an idea that cannot clarify a human situation. It is the inverse that is true.”<sup>401</sup> This echoes Husserl’s own idea of a religious path: “Human life is nothing but the *path to God*. I attempt to reach this goal without theological proofs, methods, or aids, namely to reach *God without God*. I must, as it were, eliminate God from my scientific existence in order to blaze the trail to God.”<sup>402</sup> The idea of a Man-God is meaningful insofar as the very activity theologically proposed by Christians to describe Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection as substitution and expiation for humanity is precisely the very nature of the human self given over to the world in substitution from the beginning. God’s “self-inflicted humiliation,” bringing together

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<sup>400</sup> Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 37.

<sup>401</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “Transcendence and Height,” in Basic Philosophical Writings, eds. Adriaan Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 52.

<sup>402</sup> Jaegerschmid, “Conversations with Edmund Husserl,” 339.

human and divine, transfers what is most active into what is most passive to become called forth to take responsibility for all. Consequently, incarnation, now first and foremost the human incarnation of the self “is already its expulsion into itself, exposure to offense, to accusation, to grief.”<sup>403</sup> Incarnation would be revealed as “the idea of the hostage, of expiation of me for the Other.”<sup>404</sup>

The Christian claim that Jesus of Nazareth was both human, divine, and substitute for the world, under Levinas’s reading, can be theologically meaningful apart from other historical anthropomorphic deities like the Greek pantheon as long as one begins from the embodied human in its intersubjective milieu. What we see in Levinas’s discourse on an incarnate God is precisely what Jeff Kosky was arguing when he asserted, “the religiosity met in Levinas’s phenomenology of responsibility is not an actual religion but the possibility or nonnoematic meaning of religion.”<sup>405</sup> In other words, Levinas’s phenomenological analysis of the human acts as a springboard into the theological, not necessarily a proof for a theological concept.

Kosky, however, in my reading of his work, is also an example of the problem that must be addressed if we are indeed to see Levinas as grasping an opportunity for theological discourse in his philosophy.<sup>406</sup> The issue at hand would be, if clarity into the theological is gained by first analyzing the human condition, are we not in danger of

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<sup>403</sup> Levinas, “A Man-God?” 59.

<sup>404</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>405</sup> Jeffrey L. Kosky, Levinas and the Philosophy of Religion (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), xxi.

<sup>406</sup> See my review of Levinas and the Philosophy of Religion in the Journal of History of Philosophy, vol. XL, no. 3, July 2002.

creating a god in our own image? Kosky realizes that his book will conclude with this problem left unanswered and so attempts to forewarn the reader in the introduction: “the anonymity of this God and the trauma suffered by the self are disturbingly close to a more menacing form of the anonymous as that anonymity was described in Levinas’s earliest work under the ‘name’ *il y a*.”<sup>407</sup> What makes this assertion a prime example of our new anthropomorphic problem is the manner in which the *il y a* would be disclosed is in the very nature of a transcendental phenomenological methodology as we have employed throughout this dissertation. The *there is*, we recall, acts as Levinas’s reappropriation of the discussion of Being, and while any disclosure of Being must be in terms of the transcendental, the transcendental is still within the human scope. For the anonymous God and anonymous *there is* to be different, the latter must remain with the transcendental while the former refers to the transcendent. Kosky’s introduction seems to assure the reader that this distinction cannot be easily made if made at all.

Richard Cohen, in contradistinction to Kosky’s problem, asserts that Levinas’s argument for the primacy of ethics “links transcendence, sociality, morality, and social justice.”<sup>408</sup> The link between Kosky’s springboard into theological discourse and Cohen’s assurance of transcendence in Levinas rests in Levinas’s own statements about holiness. If we are to recognize a theological opportunity, it must come with the idea of holiness. At root, that which is holy is considered to be set apart, separated from the secular, and the theme of separation is basic for Levinas’s philosophy. Separation first

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<sup>407</sup> Kosky, Levinas and the Philosophy of Religion, xxiv.

<sup>408</sup> Richard A. Cohen, “Post-Modern Jewish Philosophy,” in History of Jewish Philosophy, eds. Dan Frank and Oliver Leaman (New York: Routledge, 2004), 880.



appears as a theme, before Levinas discloses the origination of the self in others, as the description of the solitary self, a self which is completely atheistic if “one can call atheism this separation so complete that the separated being maintains itself in existence all by itself.”<sup>409</sup> However, as any phenomenologist must recognize, consciousness as intentionality already undoes the ego as purely solipsistic. Intentionality, then, is the first move toward transcendence, what is truly other, but even this move can still serve to produce only a human structure as the world is disclosed within transcendental limits. The link between Levinas’s transcendental ethics, transcendence, and holiness arises in the idea of infinity: “the idea of infinity, revealed in the face, does not only *require* a separated being; the light of the face is necessary for separation.”<sup>410</sup> While this quote from Totality and Infinity can reveal the interruption of consciousness at which point the ego places itself in question, we still need Levinas’s later work to adequately express the two movements at work in this quote. The first movement is the accretion of totality as the intentional ego recognizes itself as at home. The disruption of life at home by the face, the trace of alterity, reveals the intersubjective as the origin of the human self, meaningfully conditioning the self’s intentional movement as “for-the-other,” as oriented toward that which cannot be subsumed under any totality, as that which is illuminated as ultimately separated, or experienced as holy. While it has been argued throughout that this second, ethical movement is to be understood in very humanistic terms, it is the newly understood orientation of the self as being toward the transcendent other that brings this philosophy so close to a theological opening. To go any farther would be to

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<sup>409</sup> Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 58.

<sup>410</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

question the very idea of God “in any of the sense that religion wishes ‘theos’ to possess.”

We must expunge from our presuppositions whatever it is that theology, philosophy, and their marriage as the philosophy of religion have presented as God in the history of Western philosophy. Levinas’s note at the beginning of Otherwise than Being, which Blum has suggested undermines any religious concerns, claims that the difficult ascent of the book will reveal the importance of hearing a “God not contaminated by Being.”<sup>411</sup> The opportunity for theological discourse which Levinas’s philosophy carves out stands in stark contrast to traditional conceptualizations of transcendence. Attempts to describe God with notions of height or as eminent metaphorically place God in the heavens, but not beyond the limits of being.<sup>412</sup> Traditional concepts of infinity place God as the Highest Being, but still a being. The infinite originative of the human self is not a being as agent but the orienting of the self toward the other who remains incomprehensible in ontological categories. This transcendent other, placed into relationship with the self at the origin of the ego, is palpably absent, un-thematizable, uncontaminated by being. The possibility of religious discourse in the wake of this attitude is revolutionary for both philosophy and religion:

Nothing is less opposed to ontology than the opinion of faith. To ask oneself, as we are attempting to do here, whether God cannot be uttered in a reasonable discourse that would be neither ontology nor faith, is implicitly to doubt the formal opposition, established by Yehuda Halevy and taken up by Pascal between, on the one hand, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob invoked without

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<sup>411</sup> Levinas, Otherwise than Being, xlviii.

<sup>412</sup> Levinas, “God and Philosophy,” in Of God Who Comes to Mind, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 55-57. Also see Theodore de Boer, “Theology and the Philosophy of Religion,” in The Rationality of Transcendence (Amsterdam: J.C. Gieben, 1997), 180ff.

philosophy in faith, and on the other the god of the philosophers. It is to doubt that this opposition constitutes an alternative.<sup>413</sup>

To think God not contaminated by being necessarily upsets both religious and philosophical traditions, complacent in the basic Aristotelian framework of categories. Consequently, it is easier to use Levinas's opportunity for theology as a door that shuts rather than one that opens, so that one may be ever vigilant against the "pseudophenomenological literature" Jean Hering so feared in 1925. It is, therefore, important to see at least a taste of what can be done with Levinas once this ground has been laid.

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<sup>413</sup> Levinas, "God and Philosophy," 57.

## CHAPTER SIX What Can We Do with Levinas?

### Introduction

Jean-Yves Lacoste reminds us in “The Work and Complement of Appearing” that

Things exist inasmuch as they invite themselves to us. Were we but able to render account of this invitation, were we only to perceive that it is not in disguise that things appear to us, and were we, finally, to know the conditions under which consciousness is open, all the work of philosophy would be, by right, achievable.<sup>414</sup>

“Were we” – a contrary to fact conditional. If we *were* to have made these accounts, perceptions, and conditions – but we have not – then all of philosophy’s work would be achievable – but it seems as though it is not. Whenever philosophy flags, phenomenology trumpets the need to go back to the beginning, so we must return to ask a better question. Since “all the work of philosophy” as such is beyond the scope of this essay, let us focus upon that work which endeavors to move from the immanent to the transcendent, the move at the heart of Phenomenology and the “Theological Turn”.<sup>415</sup>

Transcendence, in this context, must mean something more than the “not-I.” In simple terms, all worldly objects that can be classified as “not-I” are transcendent to me; however, these objects are reducible to a realm of immanence, my conscious field. The transcendence which we seek must be classifiable as “other-than-I,” irreducible to my conscious field while yet integrally related to my consciousness in such a way that the practicing of phenomenology can bring the “other-than-I” into relief.

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<sup>414</sup> Jean-Yves Lacoste, “The Work and Complement of Appearing,” in Religious Experience and the End of Metaphysics, ed. Jeffrey Bloechl (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 68.

<sup>415</sup> Bernard Prusak, “Translator’s Introduction,” in Phenomenology and the “Theological Turn” (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 5.

Dominique Janicaud surely lies in wait. I must be making reference to God, having invoked the terms transcendence and an irreducible “other-than-I.” To begin with the notions of phenomenology and God is surely to castigate Janicaud, prompting him to call for further de-nuding of the transcendental I, which I have dressed up in the antithesis of the emperor’s new clothes – meaning clothes that everyone can see but pretends are not there.<sup>416</sup> If this were the case, I must admit to being in good company: Emmanuel Levinas, whom Janicaud finds to be the master-weaver of the theological covering; Jean-Luc Marion and Michel Henry, those most likely to don the inappropriate material and be chided by Janicaud, who plays the part of the bothersome but well-intentioned child in our tale. Beginning again, we must ask a question that both sides would allow, one that starts at the beginning, at immanence.

To propose a question relevant to achieving a sense of transcendence from immanence I will adapt Lacoste’s third condition for the proper working of philosophy: “what are the conditions, what is the structure, of human consciousness such that it is open to the invitation of transcendence, if an irreducible transcendence could give such an invitation?” This question strikes at the heart of Pope John Paul II’s challenge to philosophy to “vindicate the human being’s capacity to know this transcendence.”<sup>417</sup> In Biblical terms, we are seeking the very ground of St. Paul’s “measure of faith,” an openness to transcendence. Exegetically, Paul’s reference to a “measure of faith” in Romans 12 is restricted to Christian believers; however, phenomenologically I will show

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<sup>416</sup> Dominique Janicaud, “Contours of the Turn,” in Phenomenology and the Theological Turn, 27.

<sup>417</sup> John Paul II, Fides et Ratio: On the Relationship between Faith and Reason, §83, at [http://www.vatican.va/edocs/ENG0216/\\_\\_\\_PG.HTM](http://www.vatican.va/edocs/ENG0216/___PG.HTM).

that we can argue for a constitutive structure that grants a universal possibility of faith. Of course, after quoting a Pope and St. Paul, there seems little chance that Janicaud would endorse my question; however, let us not forget that according to his own assessment of the “Contours of the Turn” he is not entirely averse to discussing a “dimension of height” only the idea that this height must lead to a “Most High.”<sup>418</sup> I will answer our question by looking at Michel Henry’s work, but insofar as I believe Janicaud can be appeased, I will argue that Henry’s transcendent does not account for any measure of faith. I will then add a corrective based on Levinas’s discussion of the transcendent other.<sup>419</sup>

In order for a Levinasian corrective to be added, however, it must first be the case that Levinas and Henry are engaged in the same game, a game which I have claimed involves the rules of understanding transcendence. There should be little debate as to whether or not Levinas concerns himself with such material, for the other person has often marked a paradox of transcendence in his works. On the one hand, the other, while transcendent to me in a bodily fashion, appears well within one’s conscious field as an object. Does one not see the other’s face and body, smell the odor of clean soap or lack of deodorant, and hear the words when the other speaks. On the other hand, however, the other person is never reducible to any definitive totality within the conscious field on

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<sup>418</sup> Janicaud, “Contours of the Turn,” in Phenomenology and the Theological Turn, 28.

<sup>419</sup> Adding a Levinasian corrective on my part does not imply that Levinas found Henry to be lacking in his scholarship. Jean-Yves Lacoste reports that during the seminars he attended with Levinas in the mid-1970’s Levinas would magnanimously praise Michel Henry’s phenomenology. At this particular time, Levinas would have been familiar with the likes of Henry’s Essence of Manifestation, trans. Girard Etzkorn (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1973) and Phenomenology of the Body, trans. Girard Etzkorn (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1975). Of course, Henry’s I am the Truth: Toward a Philosophy of Christianity, trans. Susan Emanuel (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003) appeared in French in 1996. Therefore, let the speculation begin.

account of the ego's inability to know the other's experiences from the viewpoint of the other person, effectively negating the possibility of sharing in any unmediated way the meaningfulness of the world from the other's perspective, preserving the transcendence of the other.

Henry, however, clearly wants to distinguish his work from any discussion of transcendence as something ultimately beyond the conscious ego. He will claim that God, whom Henry equates with Absolute Life, is experienced in a straightway phenomenological fashion. Nevertheless, Henry is careful to distinguish this experience from the simple intending of an object. God does not appear out of the bright light with the long robe and glowing hair. This straightway fashion must also not be confused with the act of protending. Protention is the cognitive filling-in consciousness does with each adumbrated viewing of an object, and even though the protended aspect of an object (e.g. the back-side of a mirror) is necessarily absent in viewing, one can always take up a position such that what was merely a conscious protention becomes what is intentionally viewed. God, while absent, is not hiding behind Calvary's cross or in a cave on Mt. Sinai in such a way that one can merely walk around and find God hiding in those shadows. Absolute Life, as we shall see, acts upon the living in a transcendental way such that Life is ever present, but forever un-objectifiable.

Consequently we now have a solid link between Levinas and Henry that can be expressed in transcendent terms. As the other person acts in transcendental fashion by conditioning the human in terms of substitution but doing so in a way that cannot be objectified, so acts Henry's Life, which constitutes the human condition as living but

which also cannot be made into an object of consciousness. As non-objectifiable transcendental conditions, these conditions remain transcendent to my conscious field.

Any phenomenology that involves some indication of transcendence must be regarded as, in some sense, radical. The problem with laying out a brief explanation of radical phenomenology is that everything after Ideas I must look like radical phenomenology to someone like Janicaud.<sup>420</sup> However, it is not just Henry, Marion, and the other new phenomenologists who discuss Life, the gift, and the call, or even Levinas and Derrida, who discuss the other and *différance*, who have radicalized phenomenology. Husserl's protégés, Heidegger and Fink, also moved beyond Husserl's central period with discussion of world horizons, the absolute, and the meontic. Fink, as Husserl's confidant during the last years of his life, moved Husserl to radicalize himself.<sup>421</sup> Radical phenomenology begins with the movement from the description of a viewed object to a comprehension of the conditions necessary for that object to be viewed, and this entire process of analysis, which must be supplemented by re-analysis, constitutes the phenomenological reduction itself. These conditions are transcendent insofar as they are not perceptible, for they are that which we are always already in and no position can be taken up "outside" these conditions such that a proper viewing can take place.

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<sup>420</sup> Prusak makes abundantly clear that Janicaud focuses his reading of Husserl in the early texts of "Philosophy as Rigorous Science" and Ideas I. See "Translator's Introduction," in Phenomenology and the Theological Turn, 7.

<sup>421</sup> For an excellent introduction to the ways in which Fink helped move Husserl's phenomenology in the final period of Husserl's life, approximately from 1928 to 1938, see Ronald Bruzina, "Translator's Introduction," in Sixth Cartesian Meditation: The Idea of a Transcendental Theory of Method; with Textual Notations by Edmund Husserl (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).



Consequently, they can only be suggested, hinted at, or metaphorically named.<sup>422</sup> Henry and Levinas both attempt such a radical phenomenology that reaches for such conditions of the human experience, Life in the former case and the other in the latter, and each finds reason to name (perhaps metaphorically or perhaps not) their respective conditions as God.

### **Henry, God, and Absolute Life**

Our investigation of Henry will begin with his recognition of the Gospels' assertion that we are "Sons"; however, this sonship does not resemble in any way the biological notion of offspring.<sup>423</sup> To be a biological child is to be begotten into the world, originating from the genetic material of a woman and a man, growing in the womb, replicating cells and ordering cells in a human fashion. When born, the expectation of biology is that the parents have made a new life, but Henry finds a disparity between the description of various biological processes and being alive. The formation of the body is the formation of an external manifestation, the rules of which do not guarantee that the body be any more than a cadaver: a body reduced to its pure externality.<sup>424</sup> Parents, then, are not the originators of the new life but simply two who participate in Life. This Life, which receives a capital L, the sign for Janicaud that a term is about to get a divine

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<sup>422</sup> Edmund Husserl, On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time (1893-1917), trans. John Barnett Brough (London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991), §36.

<sup>423</sup> Michel Henry, "Speech and Religion: The Word of God," in Phenomenology and the Theological Turn, 222. Henry's discussion of being a Son is also throughout I Am the Truth.

<sup>424</sup> Henry, I Am the Truth, 59.

designation, is indeed defined as the very essence of God such that the living are more truly the offspring of God than of parents.<sup>425</sup>

As a living child, the only true parent is God, such that “*no man is the son of a man, or of any woman either, but only of God.*”<sup>426</sup> The extraordinary universality of this claim that all are somehow children of God should alleviate some of the pressure of charges that Henry is directly linking his philosophy with one form or another of Christian dogmatism. Take for example the conversation between Jesus and the “Jews” in John 8:41-44 (NRSV): “They said to him, ‘We are not illegitimate children; we have one father, God himself.’ Jesus said to them . . . “You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father’s desires.” Consequently, Henry’s understanding of a universal progeny need not be related to doctrinal questions of inclusion or exclusion. This clearly seems to be the case when Henry argues that the one living as a child of God is able to experience the condition as straightway phenomenological and, thus, as something discoverable in immanence.<sup>427</sup>

The assertion that living as a child of God is something universally phenomenological already seems to have two strikes against it. On the one hand is the religious claim that evidence of God is not secularly manifest but divinely revealed, while

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<sup>425</sup> Throughout this essay, I will be using the term life with and without Henry’s capitalization. Whenever life is directly associated with Henry’s analysis or with God, expect the capital letter, and when life is discussed in broader reference to phenomenology, particularly Husserl’s life-world, I will leave it generically uncapitalized. However, in these instances, we should realize that Henry would not fail to give these a divine mark.

<sup>426</sup> Henry, I Am the Truth, 70.

<sup>427</sup> Henry, I Am the Truth and “Speech and Religion,” 23 and 222 respectively.

on the other hand is Husserl's prescription, of which Janicaud is so fond of reminding the new phenomenologists, that any notion of God as an object of phenomenology must be bracketed off. Both of these objections, however, begin with the idea of God as a being in the world, existing in some special way such that God is in hiding and will not come out except under miraculous circumstances, but as Henry explains, the Truth of Christianity is not about God as a being but about "a transcendental phenomenology whose central concepts are Father and Son," God and Christ.<sup>428</sup> The essence of God as Life, then, is not only transcendental but absolute, being fundamental ground for the very goings on of the living of lived experiences. At this point, we see the need for a radical phenomenology to be performed within immanent life, for while that which is absolute is integral to the coming to pass of living, it does not appear in the world as an object; therefore, it is not observed in the manner of things. Life is also not observed in the manner of the ontologically disclosed, wherein a regression is made from what is manifest to the conditions of manifestation. What we mean here is clearly evidenced at the seminal stages of a phenomenology of life when we see Husserl introduce his widely applauded concept of the *life-world*, that analytic concept used for disclosing the experienced "being-in-the-world". Emphasis has been placed continually on the side of the *world*, leaving under-developed and *presupposed* the investigation of life.<sup>429</sup>

A study of life would have to mean a phenomenology that is essentially aware of itself. Inasmuch as phenomenology is expected to be that philosophy of disclosure of an object intentionally grasped in lived experience via acts of analysis and reflection, a

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<sup>428</sup> Henry, *I Am the Truth*, 52.

<sup>429</sup> Ronald Bruzina, *Edmund Husserl and Eugen Fink: Beginnings and Ends in Phenomenology 1928-1938* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 320.

phenomenology aware of itself is more insofar as the acts of reflection and analysis do not just reveal the lived experiences of a consciousness but reveal instances of *living* itself. In the doing of phenomenology, we find some of the intricate goings on of life, and if we recognize that reflection and analysis are but parts to the whole of living, then it becomes apparent that all conscious intending are *acts of life* that find fulfillment in the apprehending of an object. The self, then, is a Son, in Henry's terms, "generated in absolute phenomenological life" because the self is grounded in life in an absolute sense, meaning the self does not partake of a portion or even of all of life.<sup>430</sup> A self is a corporal instance of life engendering itself as a person, which Henry expresses in the double claim: "Life self-engenders itself as me . . . Life engenders me as itself."<sup>431</sup> If we can say that God is Life, and we are only hinting at our readiness to make this statement, then we can now see why Henry so often invokes Meister Eckhart who echoes the double claim about life wherein "God is begotten as myself. . . God gives birth to me as himself."<sup>432</sup>

Have we gone too far? Surely Janicaud's concerns are validated, and Henry's priestly robes, supposedly locked-up in the closet of the *epoché*, were never truly discarded.

Let us turn to two non-doctrinal sources that suggest Henry's equation of God to life is not a violation of phenomenological bracketing: a Hebrew-English lexicon and the work of Eugen Fink, who would never be confused with the new phenomenologists or with any theological preoccupation. What we will find is that Janicaud presupposes the

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<sup>430</sup> Henry, I Am the Truth, 135.

<sup>431</sup> Ibid., 104-5.

<sup>432</sup> Henry, "Speech and Religion," 223.

term God to be necessarily laden with religious assumptions. The word God, however, to suit Henry's purposes, only needs to represent the absolute origin of life, names for which, Husserl has reminded us, we only have metaphors. The meaning of God's name, the Tetragrammaton, is philologically debatable, but recent scholars tend to agree that YHWH represents a lost causal form of the verb to be (Hifil 3rd masc. sing.). Therefore, without any orthodoxy attached, YHWH suggests the "one who brings to pass," an equation with the origin of life.<sup>433</sup> Echoing this absolute usage is Fink, whose work centers on the methodology of disclosing and the disclosing of that which is originally constitutive of lived experience. Fink writes that even though the absolute cannot be brought directly into view, phenomenology transforms philosophy such that "philosophy is the manifestation of God in us. God is not a transcendent idol, but rather is the me-ontic depth of the world and existence."<sup>434</sup> In this disclosure of the manifestation of God, there is an "un-nihilating of the Absolute" which Fink recognizes as "true theogony."<sup>435</sup> In essence, the disclosure of the Absolute is linguistically compatible with watching the birth of God, simply describable in the equation of God and Life.

Janicaud's accusations that Henry has done nothing more than disclose a transcendental ego already dressed in religious raiment seems untenable given that the conception of God as life appears a well accepted term for the very origination of life.

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<sup>433</sup> The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1979), 217-219.

<sup>434</sup> Eugen Fink, Phänomenologische Werkstatt, Band 3.1 der Gesamtausgabe: Die Doktorarbeit und erste Assistenzjahre bei Husserl, Herausgegeben von Ronald Bruzina (Freiburg/München: Verlag Karl Albar, 2006), Aus Mappe Z-IV (1928), 36a.

<sup>435</sup> Eugen Fink Manuscripts, Z-VII XIV/4a.

However, it is not necessarily the case that we have found that structure of the human that guarantees the possibility of a connection to the transcendent. Can we in any way consider his work as actually Toward a Christian Philosophy or actually fulfilling the task set forth in this essay to discover the possibility of a connection between the human and the transcendent? Henry's absolute life is transcendent in that it is forgotten as I exercise those capacities which it enables. It is ever behind what I do, while never being present. However, as argued, this transcendence is the very essence of immanence itself, which determines that "[Faith] is simply a name for the unshakeable certainty that life has of living . . . Faith does not come from the fact that we believe, it comes from the fact that we are the living in life."<sup>436</sup> In essence, faith is no more than the recognition of our ultimate phenomenological ground, an orientation in perception such that the absolute is brought to relief by radical phenomenology. Such faith is, radically put, a faith in oneself as much as it might be a faith in God, such that every move toward transcendence brings one back to immanence.

The charge against Henry could be couched in terms of Gnosticism. Has Henry forsaken any recognition of a personal relationship with God, a relationship which appears presupposed in any discussion of sonship, for a speculative grasping of God as absolute origin, which is reducible to an understanding of the transcendental conditions of the self as living? Henry seems to avoid this charge, at first, in his re-conceptualization of salvation, for salvation is not in terms of any special knowledge but is achieved through acts of mercy that reorient the ego which has forgotten its engendered

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<sup>436</sup> Henry, "Speech and Religion," 227.

origin in absolute life.<sup>437</sup> We should not fall into debates of salvation by works or by grace here, for salvation is also reconceived as less than theological. Salvation is the process of making the self aware of its dependence upon Life; it is a recovery from the fall that is the forgetting of sonship. The ego forgets its origin on account of its active life wherein each individual ego is aware of those powers it controls: feeling, movement, and thinking. In the exercise of these powers, the ego forgets the conditioning of life, the affective life that makes these powers possible on account of the ego's mastery of its powers in effective living. "In the action of the ego as action, supposedly issuing from itself and aimed only at itself, the very essence of absolute life is ruled out."<sup>438</sup> The reorientation necessary for bringing the ego back to itself in the light of its origins does not occur in Gnostic speculation but in the doing of acts of mercy.

If it is the case that Henry's divulgence of the absolute is not accomplished in the speculative sense, then we must discover how deeds of mercy awaken the self to its proper origins. For examples of these deeds Henry refers us to medieval theology's seven works of corporal mercy, which include such acts as feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and caring for the sick. In these cases, the one who performs these services still acts from the ego's ability to effect changes in the world, but the meaningfulness of these acts will also affect the performer in such a way that the condition of Life in which the action is done is disclosed. For Henry, such a merciful act realized as part of the absolute occurs in the book of John in the example of Jesus' healing on the Sabbath.<sup>439</sup>

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<sup>437</sup> Henry, I am the Truth, 153ff.

<sup>438</sup> Ibid., 168.

<sup>439</sup> Ibid., 181.

While it was accepted that working on the Sabbath was forbidden, Jesus' justification was that his deed was not his alone but that he was always at work just as God was also always at work. The connection between Jesus' act of healing and God's perpetual work as Life, for Henry, is in the realization that the act of mercy is simultaneously an act of life affirmation. That Jesus was aware of the overlap between his particular deed and the very possibility of Life that exists in God is the proof of Jesus' ultimate claim to sonship.

What becomes ultimately problematic for Henry is the way in which the deeds of mercy do not take one beyond the self but firmly return the self to the absolute Life of which the particular ego is already an expression. One can be reoriented to engendering Life by performing life affirming acts; however, the reorientation that occurs is not toward anything absolutely other but toward something absolutely immanent, as Henry asserts in the following:

One who is born of life finds actions capable of satisfying him only if this action suits his condition. The action can only suit the condition of Son if it comes from that condition and returns to it. *Its coming from the condition of Son is what makes it possible in the first place.* There is no "I Can" except in life.<sup>440</sup>

We have already remarked that our discussion must begin from the immanent to be properly phenomenological, but in order for our analysis to be anything toward a philosophy of Christianity, there must result a sense in which the transcendence in immanence points one beyond the conditions of the ego, which Henry's reciprocal engendering between God and self appears to deny. The unfortunate consequence is that either the accusation of Gnosticism must be revisited, or worse, that transcendence reveals what is ultimately intelligible and as intelligible does not allow entry into anything theic.

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<sup>440</sup> Henry, *I am the Truth*, 170.



I do not in any way disparage the impressive discussion of life and the absolute and the human's position as child of life. Nevertheless, is faith in Henry's absolute "Father" not more properly Christian faith when placed in *Abba*, daddy?

### **A Levinasian Corrective**

Levinas's concept of the same haunts Henry's transcendence revealing the idea to be insufficient for describing the life of the human being, the new conception of which was Henry's goal. Levinas agrees with Henry insofar as transcendence "is the very life of the human," and in this case, Levinas recognizes that transcendence "is used without any theological presupposition." However, that life must already be "troubled by the Infinite."<sup>441</sup> What is insufficient in Henry's work is that life as the field into which living being emerges is not specific enough in its essence to describe the living *human* being. Inasmuch as life acts as a coming to oneself, a wakefulness open to the world, the transcendence of life does not assure that the living "I" will acknowledge the right of anything else to awaken into the world as different. If living things are the very essence of God and the very essence of God is my essence, then all living things and I are essentially the same. Everyone is me.

It would appear that Henry's reading would run afoul of Levinas's harshest comments for Christianity. Levinas critiques the Christian tradition for having succumbed to the influence of the Western tradition's penchant for totalization: "Christianity too is tempted by temptation, and in this it is profoundly Western."<sup>442</sup> What

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<sup>441</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, "Philosophy and Awakening," in *Entre Nous*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 88-89.

<sup>442</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, "The Temptation of Temptation," in *Nine Talmudic Readings*, trans. Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 33.

he means here is that Christianity sees itself caught in a struggle with the tempter, caught in a struggle with temptations, and as Nietzsche and Hegel correctly surmised this corporate and individual conflict acts as a high motivator for Christians to evolve in the world, constantly overcoming new challenges, conquering, and assimilating. Any time Christianity constructs a new totality, reduction to the same, whether political or intellectual, as we have in the case of Henry, Levinas would almost certainly point to Christianity's own scriptures that point the way to the transcendent God through ethical human action for the other. Without religious misgivings, he willingly quotes from the Gospel of Matthew where those condemned for their lack of attention to God's needs ask: "Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison?" God responds, "Truly, I say to you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these you did not do for me" (Matthew 25:44-45).

Levinas, however, also appears to support Henry when he asks, "is not transcendence to God?"<sup>443</sup> The important difference of course is the recognition that transcendence as a non-theological concept delivers us a-Dieu rather than reveal the essence of God itself. The human, as such, not only emerges at its foundation in life, but it is also fundamentally conditioned in the face-to-face, the immanent meeting of one person with another. The otherness of the other, absent in the presence of its face, is also a transcendent that receives a divine appellation, but just as the case with Henry, it is difficult to see how the other, as God, represents anything of God to whom we pray. Nevertheless, it is within these ideas that I believe lie phenomenology's greatest service to religion. The importance of the other's description as God is not in the revelation of

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<sup>443</sup> Levinas, "Hermeneutics and Beyond," in Entre Nous, 73.

the divine but in the orienting of the self toward transcendence. Even if we grant, as I will, that the otherness of the other person in no way equates with the God of the philosophers or with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the otherness of the other person conditions the human such that the human being is constituted as devoted to that which is incomprehensible, ineffable, and transcendent to experience.

Devotion to the other leaves one without Henry's grasp of God, but realizing the problematic nature of such a grasp, it is enough that such devotion leaves one with the sense of holiness. Derrida notes Levinas's remark, "one often speaks of ethics to describe what I do, but what really interests me in the end is not ethics, not ethics alone, but the holy, the holiness of the holy."<sup>444</sup> This sense of holiness that so interests Levinas originates in the emerging of the I into the world as ethical, the very event of which he declares would also be "first theology."<sup>445</sup> Such a theology, however, is not one of conceptual/Gnostic proportions in which the deity is grasped in concept but in which the deity is brought "to just and human efforts, as one brings the light of day to the human eye, the only organ capable of seeing it."<sup>446</sup> Through ethical human efforts, the human situation clarifies the idea of God, not in terms of conceptual grasping but in terms of familiarity, a drawing near to holiness.

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<sup>444</sup> Jacques Derrida, The Work of Mourning (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 202.

<sup>445</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, "The Awakening of the I," in Is it Righteous to be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas, ed. Jill Robbins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 182.

<sup>446</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, "For a Jewish Humanism," in Difficult Freedom, trans. Sean Hand (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 274-5.

To call out Abba, daddy . . . mommy, is to reach away from oneself in the ultimate hope that that which is absent will respond in some way. However, such a reaching out must begin with a measure of faith, a possibility within the very structure of the human being that is always already oriented toward the transcendent. Regardless of how much Henry's description of Life is necessary for uncovering the absolute foundation of the living being, it is simply not enough to account for the desire to reach God. A fuller description of all the conditions that structure consciousness is necessary. However, with the beginnings of this description in hand and the condition of devotion to the other disclosed, one can turn back to Henry's analysis with an affirmative answer from Levinas's question. Indeed, transcendence does lead us to God, but only if we begin with a measure of faith.

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  - “Review of The Oxford History of Western Philosophy,” Transcendent Philosophy, Vol. 2, No. 1, March 2001 (London).

Essays:

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