Thought and Existence

In 1963 G. Deledalle and D. Huisman published a collection of texts in which most of the outstanding French philosophers presented their life and work: *Les philosophes français d’aujourd’hui par eux-mêmes: Autobiographie de la philosophie française contemporaine*. Emmanuel Levinas’s self-presentation is found on pages 325-28. Under the title “Signature,” this text also forms the closing pages (321-27) of his own book *Difficile Liberté*, which appeared in the same year. For a Dutch collection of his work, *Het menselijk gelaat* (The Human Face), in which “Signature,” under the title “Handschrift” (Handwriting), figured as the opening section, Levinas added a few paragraphs, and the French text of this version appeared in the second edition of *Difficile Liberté*. Its sober enumeration of facts and thoughts calls for additional information and meditation in order to grasp the full meaning of his modest statements. On the course of Levinas’s life and his intellectual development, one can now consult a large number of interviews, especially those print-

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ed in Emmanuel Levinas: *Qui êtes-vous?*² and *Éthique et Infini.*³ Whereas the former tells us many details of his life, the latter one, which concentrates on the starting points and the evolution of his thought, offers the best introduction to his work.

Even without resolving the general problem of the relations between thought and existence, one can safely state that at least some acquaintance with the personal and cultural background of Levinas’s thinking is very helpful, if not necessary, to understand his criticism of the Western philosophical tradition as well as his own, surprisingly original thought. I will therefore begin this introduction by mentioning first some events and influences that are relevant for a correct and sympathetic understanding of his texts. Thus we will encounter several authors and traditions toward which Levinas had to take a stand by wholly or partially integrating, rejecting, or transforming them. It will provide us with a first, provisional sketch of what, in his case, it meant to become a philosopher.

Born in 1906 of Jewish parents in Kaunas, Lithuania, Levinas was initiated very early into Jewish orthodoxy. Being a Lithuanian Jew, he was soon confronted with the surrounding Christianity—a Christianity not free from anti-Semitic tendencies and actions—and with the Russian language and culture, which dominated the school system. His father had a bookshop, and besides the Bible, which Emmanuel early on learned to read in Hebrew, the great Russian poets and novelists Pushkin, Gogol, Lermontov, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, etc., read in the original language, formed his mind.

In 1923 Levinas left Russia for Strasbourg to study philosophy. Because of the political freedom and the philosophical tradition found in France, he came to love that country, and, shortly after having published his dissertation in 1930, he became a French citizen. His studies familiarized him with the classical texts of Greek and modern philosophy and with the French literary, psychological and philosophical tradition, as they were presented in French universities during the twenties. A decisive turn was his introduction to Husserl’s phenomenolo-


Husserl's reception in France would still take a long time, but Levinas soon decided to write his dissertation on the fundamental concepts of his phenomenology. He focused on the role of intuition in Husserl's thought and spent a year in Freiburg (Germany), where he attended the master's teaching during the summer semester of 1928. Heidegger was still teaching in Marburg, but during the winter semester of 1928-1929 Levinas could attend Heidegger's first course in Freiburg, titled *Introduction to Philosophy*. In 1929 he published a review of Husserl's *Ideas: "Sur les 'Ideen'de M.E. Husserl"* and in 1930 his dissertation, *La théorie de l'intuition dans la phénoménologie de Husserl*, which received a prize from the French Academy. In the meantime, however, Levinas had come to recognize that, more than Husserl, the author of *Sein und Zeit* was performing a radical and most promising revolution in philosophy. Heidegger's influence is clear in Levinas's dissertation on Husserl, and through a series of essays on *Being and Time* Levinas would remain for many years the leading French interpreter of Heidegger's philosophy.

After the completion of his studies, Levinas returned to France. In Paris he participated in the administration of the schools through which the *Alliance Israélite Universelle* educated young Jews, who would become teachers in Turkey, the Middle East, Asia, North Africa, and Europe. Later, from 1946-1961, he would become the director of the *École Normale Orientale* in Paris, where these future teachers were formed.

Aside from some articles on Husserl and Heidegger and a

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4 According to Levinas's own statements, it was another student, Gabrielle Peiffer, who drew his attention to Husserl's philosophy, which he began to study in 1927-28 together with Jean Héring, who wrote the first French book on phenomenology: *Phénoménologie et philosophie religieuse* (Paris, 1925). Cf. Emmanuel Levinas: *Qui êtes-vous*, 73 and "Signature" in DL 373.

5 This course was published in 1996 as Volume 27 of the *Gesamtausgabe* of Heidegger's work by Klostermann in Frankfurt/Main and translated as *The Actual Problematic of Philosophy*.


series of reviews, Levinas’s philosophical production remained modest. Apart from some short pieces of a religious or, as he jokingly said, “parochial” character, he wrote only one thematic essay: “De l’évasion” (translated as “On Escape”), a difficult text in which some aspects of his later work are already visible.

In the early 1930s, Levinas was preparing a book on Heidegger, but only fragments of it were finished, when Heidegger’s collaboration with the Nazis and his rectoral address of 1933 became known. This news was a terrible shock and a turning point for the young Levinas. Although he continued to see Heidegger as the greatest philosopher of the twentieth century and *Sein und Zeit* as one of the five greatest books of Western philosophy, his philosophical judgment about Heidegger became increasingly critical. Initially still rather mild, his criticisms developed slowly into a sharp polemic against the pagan inspiration of Heidegger’s thought. Even Hitler did not provoke Levinas to violent criticism during these years. His article “The philosophy of Hitlerism” (1934) is a relatively mild attack, which Levinas later dropped from his C.V., because he regretted to have honored his target by naming it a “philosophy.”

The victories of the Nazis, the French mobilization, and the war silenced Levinas for several years. As a French military officer, Levinas, once captured, was sent to a prisoners’ camp, where he had to do forced labor. His wife and daughter hid in a Catholic convent in France, but his wife’s mother was deported and his parents and brothers who had stayed in Lithuania were murdered by collaborators of the Nazi occupation.

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8 Some of these reviews were published in the short-lived review *Recherches Philosophiques*, founded in 1931, in which several émigrés, such as Eric Weil, A. Koyré, and K. Löwith, published.

9 “De l’évasion” was published in *Recherches Philosophiques* 5 (1935-36): 373-92. It was republished, with a letter from Levinas, by Jacques Rolland, who added an introduction and notes (Fata Morgana, Montpellier, 1982).

10 The other four are Plato’s *Phaedrus*, Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, and Bergson’s *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* (Paris, 1888).

11 See below more on Levinas’s relations to Husserl and Heidegger. For a review of his development in this respect during the first period of his reflection, see “From Phenomenology through Ontology to Metaphysics: Levinas’s Perspective on Husserl from 1927 to 1950” in my *Beyond: The Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1997): 38-52.


13 A glimpse of the situation in the camp is given in “Nom de chien ou le droit naturel,” *Difficile Liberté* (1976), 199-202.
When Levinas returned to Paris after the war, he published a small book with the programmatic and provocative title *From Existence to Existents*. In it he presented for the first time an—albeit still fragmentary—phenomenology of his own. The title announces a reversal of Heidegger’s enterprise. Whereas the latter starts from a reflection on beings (*Seiendes*, *l’étant*, or *l’existant*) in order to unconceal being (*das Sein* or *l’existence*) itself, Levinas describes here the way of truth as a reverse movement from *Sein* ("existence") to "existents" (*Seiendes*). The book attracted little attention because its style of description and analysis were very uncommon and difficult, its orientation unexpected, and the author unknown. Twenty years later, the first edition was not yet sold out.

Not having obtained a *doctorat d’État* and without a university position, Levinas remained marginal to the philosophical scene in the academic world. His relations to Maurice Blanchot, Gabriel Marcel, and Jean Wahl did not make him famous outside of a small circle of experts. However, Wahl, who himself had a chair at the Sorbonne, invited Levinas to give talks in a lecture series which he had organized under the name *Collège Philosophique*. The four lectures Levinas delivered there on "Time and the Other" were published in 1947, together with texts of Wahl, Alphonse de Waelhens, and Jeanne Hersch, under the title *Choice-World-Existence*.

Although Levinas’s philosophical production between 1947 and the publication of *Totalité et Infini* in 1961 remained modest, some important articles from this time show a highly independent and forceful but difficult thinking. Besides six new

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15 The doctorat d’Etat is the doctor’s degree granted by the nation, not by a university. It often leads to a professorship at a French university.


articles on Husserl and/or Heidegger,\textsuperscript{18} one on Proust,\textsuperscript{19} and one on Lévy-Bruhl.\textsuperscript{20} Levinas published a short paper for the 1948 International Congress of Philosophy, held in Amsterdam,\textsuperscript{21} and five very dense thematic studies, in which his original position became more visible.\textsuperscript{22} The distinction between Levinas’s studies of other authors and his own thematic reflection is a rather superficial one, since his rendering of others’ thoughts most often is also a profound and original meditation on the questions treated by them. His very important article on Heidegger, “Is Ontology Fundamental?” (“L’ontologie est-elle fondamentale?”),\textsuperscript{23} for example, not only gives a critical interpretation of Heidegger’s thoughts on being but also sketches Levinas’s own different orientation and the beginning of some new lines of thought that will develop from it. The essays “Freedom and Command”\textsuperscript{24} and “Ego and the Totality”\textsuperscript{25} anticipate parts of \textit{Totality and Infinity}, whereas “Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite”\textsuperscript{26} already exposes the main coordinates of that book.

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{20} “Lévy-Bruhl et la philosophie contemporaine,” \textit{Revue Philosophique de la France et de l’Étranger} 82 (1957): 556-69.
  \item \textsuperscript{21} “Pluralisme et Transcendance,” \textit{Proceedings of the Tenth International Congress of Philosophy} (Amsterdam 11-18 August 1948), Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing Company, 1949, 1:282-83. With a few modifications and under the title “La transcendance et la fécondité,” this text has become a part of \textit{Totalité et Infini}. See TI 251-254.
  \item \textsuperscript{23} See note 18.
  \item \textsuperscript{24} CPP 15-24, translation of ““Liberté et commandement,” \textit{Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale} 58 (1953): 236-241.
  \item \textsuperscript{25} CPP 25-46, translation of “Le moi et la totalité,” \textit{Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale} 59 (1954): 353-373.
  \item \textsuperscript{26} CPP 47-60, translation of “La philosophie et l’idée de l’Infini,” \textit{Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale} 62 (1957): 241-53; reprinted in EDHH 165-78.
\end{itemize}
In addition to these philosophical studies, Levinas’s renewed concentration on his Jewish roots is evident in a multitude of papers on various aspects of Judaism. From 1947 to 1960, he published more than fifty of these more explicitly Jewish pieces.27

It was only in 1961 that Levinas gained international fame by publishing his main thesis for the doctorat d’État: Totalité et Infini.28 A continual stream of invitations, talks, articles and interviews followed. Together with all the translations of his writings, the 1990 edition of Roger Burggraeve’s bibliography counts more than nine hundred publications through 1985, and many others were to follow.29

Although Levinas was already fifty-five when he obtained his doctorat d’État, soon after which he became a full professor at the University of Poitiers, he had not yet reached the end of his philosophical evolution. The next landmark was the publication of Autrement qu’Être ou Au-delà de l’Essence30 in 1974. This book expressed not so much a «turn» or Kehre, as some commentators have said,31 but rather a radicalization of the thoughts reached in 1961. The earlier adherence to a partially ontological language, still maintained in Totality and Infinity, has been transformed into a more consequential style, and the considerable difficulties of Levinas’s attempt to think beyond ontology are thematized with greater force and lucidity than before. However, one cannot say that Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence represents the final stage of Levinas’s developments; for, although most of the topics treated in his pub-


28 Totalité et Infini. Essai sur l’extériorité (Phaenomenologica, vol. 8), La Haye, Martinus Nijhoff 1961. Instead of a second book, as formerly prescribed by the statute of the doctorat d’Etat, Levinas was allowed to present and defend the totality of his preceding philosophical studies.


lications after 1974 are already contained in this second *opus magnum*, they are also preparations for a new and independent book on time as diachrony, for which he has written fragments without having been able to finish this project.

### Roots and Traditions

Many writers on Levinas present his work as a synthetic, hybrid, or paradoxical result of Greek and Jewish culture, neglecting or denying thereby the importance of other traditions like the Roman, Russian, Christian, or Germanic ones.\(^{32}\) Such an interpretative scheme has the advantage of all simplifications: by approaching a limited number of aspects from partial perspectives, it illuminates them against an obscure background into which other aspects may have disappeared. As an initial orientation, it may nevertheless be helpful *if* it indicates its own partiality and oversimplification.

The scheme of “Jewgreek or Greekjew” has the advantage that—in opposition to a strong but forgetful tendency in contemporary philosophy—it does not altogether neglect the overall importance of the Bible and its many Jewish and Christian interpretations for the social and spiritual history of Western civilization. We will have various occasions to show the impact of a certain Judaism on Levinas’s thinking, which does not thereby become less philosophical than, for example, Heidegger’s philosophical interpretations of Hölderlin or Trakl. Here I only want to stress that, as a Lithuanian-born, culturally Russian Jew, French-educated citizen of Europe, and philosophical member of contemporary humanity, Levinas is not only heir to (a certain) Greece and (a certain) Israel but also to the Roman Empire with the medieval and modern transformations of its legal and cultural system, to Slavic and Germanic elements that entered into his formation, and even to a certain form of Christianity that has marked and impregnated two thousand years of European history. All these elements have some independence vis-à-vis one another; and although the ways in which they have become aspects of the common culture cannot be considered the most genuine or pure, it is impossible to reduce Rome to Greece, the Germanic traditions to nothing at all, and Christianity to a subordinate heresy of Judaism or to an amalgam of Jewish faith and Hellenistic philosophy. Characterizations of Western cul-

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ture as “Platonic,” “Greek,” or “Christian” presuppose that the histories to which we belong form one history whose life belongs to one single spirit, but they are too primitive from a historical point of view to be taken as serious attempts at characterizing three thousand years of civilization and action. At best, such titles can give a first hint of the real orientation, but even then we have to ask first what “Greek,” “Jewish,” “Christian,” etc. may mean.

The name “Greece,” for instance, as used in this context, is far from clear. We all know that Plato and Aristotle produced their philosophy after the “Golden Age” of Pericles, and that the great period from Parmenides to Sophocles was not the Greece that the multiplicity of European Renaissances tried to imitate, revive, or renew during the ninth, twelfth, thirteenth, fifteenth, seventeenth, eighteenth, or nineteenth centuries. To which Greece do we refer when we call some tendency of our culture, some work of a great author, or some strain of thought “Greek”? Is it the Greece of Homer, Aeschylus, Euclides, Demosthenes, Zeno, Epictetus, Philo, Origines, Pseudo-Dionysius, Thomas, Erasmus, Winckelmann, Goethe, Hölderlin, Keats, Hegel, Burckhardt, Nietzsche, Heidegger...? Many different Greeces exist, as many perhaps as there are Europes or Occidents. Do we all share one Western world? Is not one of the features that makes our civilization simultaneously great and weak precisely its ability to maintain a more or less peaceful community of radically divergent traditions and histories? Today the price paid for our moral and ideological pluralism still seems to lie in the superficiality or even the emptiness of our general culture as illustrated by the media. Is this price too high for peace?

As a philosopher, Levinas is not and is Jew, Roman, Russian, French, European, and therefore also “Christian” in a certain way. The specificity of his participation in the history of thought is marked by all the “nonphilosophical” traditions in which he lived and by the peculiarities of the factual situation (the constellation of institutions, teachers, texts, ways of discussion, colleagues, publishing policies, etc.) in which he has come to find himself.

Levinas’s French philosophical formation familiarized him with those philosophers who, during the first half of the twentieth century, were considered great: Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, Plotinus, Descartes, Spinoza, Malebranche, Leibniz, Berkeley, Hume, Kant, Fichte, Comte, Nietzsche, etc. The tradition of French philosophy that confronted Levinas as a student was a special form of idealism (Félix Ravaisson, Octave Hamelin, Léon Brunschvicg), which stayed in touch with mathematics
and psychology. Good historical studies of ancient and modern philosophy as well as the great tradition of the “explication de textes” gave him a solid orientation in the history of philosophy. Henri Bergson had fought against the prevailing position of the sciences, but a Bergsonian school did not exist. Hegel was not read much; Marx still less.

The most striking feature of the philosophy taught at the universities of France was the total absence of all philosophies produced by Christian thinkers from the beginning of our chronology until Descartes and Pascal. Of the first five centuries, only writers like Plotinus and Porphyry counted as philosophers: neither Philo nor Origenes, Augustine or Pseudo-Dionysius were treated as examples of independent thinking. No medieval philosophers were taken into consideration because they were branded “theologians.” The eighteenth-century’s contemptuous ignorance about the “Dark Ages” was still the prevailing view. The period between Plotinus and Descartes (a period of thirteen hundred years) was simply ignored, as if Christian faith had prevented all brilliant people from thinking. Even after Étienne Gilson and others had proved that one can hardly understand Descartes, Leibniz, Kant, or Hegel without being acquainted with scholastic philosophy, the general conception of philosophical history did not change noticeably.

Like every other student of philosophy, Levinas had to make choices in his readings and meditations. He answered the beneficial challenge of Husserlian and Heideggerian phenomenology by becoming a pupil of Heidegger, but soon the suspicion became almost inevitable that Heidegger’s thought was somehow open to Nazi influences. The long incubation of Levinas’s own thought might be related to the difficulty of finding a way amidst the contradictory tendencies he experienced in the

33 Before giving a diagnosis or criticism of “Western philosophy,” we should first ask what we know about the two thousand years thus summarized in two words. Since it is physically impossible to have read all the original and important texts of these millennia (it is even impossible to select them without reliance on the authority of others who may have read them or depend themselves on others), the representation of “Western philosophy” is a risky extrapolation based on a very restricted selection of works. On the basis of the texts we possess of Heidegger, Levinas, and Derrida, we may say that their situation is roughly the same as that of the French university sketched here. Patristic and medieval philosophy plays hardly any role in their diagnosis. For “enlightened” thinkers, philosophy tends to be restricted to Plato, Aristotle (4th century B.C.), the Stoics, and Plotinus, on the one hand, and the philosophers of the last four centuries (from Hobbes and Descartes to the present), on the other.
twenties and the thirties. As a Jew and Philosopher, he not only shared the general crisis of European intellectuals but experienced intensely the apparent incompatibility between Israel and a certain Europe (or was it Europe as such?). Did this opposition and that crisis have anything to do with one another?

Who were and remained his favorite authors? As far as his works show certain affinities, the main philosophers he admired are Plato (whose Phaedrus, Republic, Gorgias, and Phaedo he often quotes), Descartes (mainly as the writers of the Meditations), Kant (the first and second Critiques), Hegel (The Phenomenology of Spirit), Husserl, and Heidegger. Of these, Plato and Heidegger are certainly the most important ones. In the summary of Totalité et Infini published in the Annals of the Sorbonne, Levinas even goes so far as to say that a renewal of Platonism belongs to the task of contemporary philosophy. As far as Hegel is concerned, we must be aware of the Parisian scene of the years during which Levinas prepared his first opus magnum. Even in the fifties, it was still largely dominated by Alexandre Kojève’s interpretation of the Phenomenology of Spirit. In his courses of the thirties at the School of the “Hautes Etudes,” this Russian émigré transformed Hegel’s book of 1807 into a philosophy of history that could compete with Marx’s interpretation of world history. It became thereby one of the sources for postwar existentialism. Jean Hyppolite’s much more adequate interpretation of the Phenomenology had corrected Kojève’s distortions, but the latter’s more easily understood and “nicer” interpretations have continued to exercise a


35 The first French author who changed the traditional portrait of Hegel as an extremely abstract and “speculative” philosopher was Jean Wahl, whose book La conscience malheureuse, published in 1928, tried to show that, in many respects, young Hegel was close to Kierkegaard.


37 J. Hyppolite, Genèse et structure de la Phénoménologie de l’Esprit de Hegel, 2 vols. (Paris: Aubier, 1946). This book had been accepted as the main thesis for Hyppolite’s doctorat d’Etat, whereas the second book was his translation of the Phenomenology into French.
strong influence in France and elsewhere. Levinas’s explicit and implicit references to Hegel must therefore be read with this background in mind. Rather than being considered the last great metaphysician, Hegel was considered to be the first philosopher of history. According to this view, history would be the absolute power that decides the destiny of humankind and pronounces the final judgment about its meaning. This (mis-)interpretation of Hegel has been so powerful that it sometimes penetrated Levinas’s interpretations of Heidegger’s philosophy.

Already in his dissertation of 1930 on intuition, which for Husserl was “the principle of principles,” Levinas showed his preference for Heidegger’s existential ontology over and above Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology of consciousness. His first articles on Heidegger testified to a deep admiration and contained no criticism. Even after 1933, he did not sharply attack Heidegger, but Heidegger’s collaboration with the Nazis demanded an explanation in which National Socialism’s relations to Heidegger’s thought could not be ignored. Levinas’s own philosophical approach and style remained, however, much closer to Heidegger’s than to those of Husserl or other phenomenologists.

The first article to manifest Levinas’s growing distance is the essay “De l’évasion” (“On Escape”) of 1935, in which Levinas asks how thinking can escape an all-penetrating domination of being. It is the reverse of the question whether and how transcendence is possible—a question that, from now on, will inspire and dominate all his reflections. As a questioning beyond being, it names its point of orientation by different terms such as “the other,” “the infinite,” “the metaphysical,” “God.” Many titles testify programmatically to this orientation by opposing being (which, as all-embracing, is connected to totality) to something else: Totality and Infinity, Other(wise) Than Being, “Beyond
Being,” “Thought of Being and the Question of the Other.”

On the other hand, the discussion with Heidegger’s meditation on being always accompanies Levinas’s search not only as a target but also and primarily because the question of the being of beings and being itself constitutes an essential element in any radical thought. In Levinas’s interpretation, Heidegger’s “ontology” is a splendid renewal of the Western philosophical tradition inherited from Parmenides. A thorough critique of Heidegger is therefore necessary if one wants to know where we stand as heirs of the tradition who experience the crisis of contemporary civilization.

The attempt to characterize Western philosophy as a whole from a critical distance in order to grasp its principle(s) or spirit is a metaphilosophical topos practiced by most of the great philosophers since Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* and Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Although Levinas’s diagnosis shows similarities with Heidegger’s critique, the latter’s thought is seen as an example—albeit a revolutionary one—of the Western mode of existence and thinking. This mode should not, however, be called “metaphysical,” as Heidegger claims, but “ontological.” Against the constant attacks of contemporary philosophy on “Platonism” and their attempts to overcome “metaphysics,” *Totality and Infinity* tries to rehabilitate simultaneously a new form of metaphysics and the most profound inspiration of Plato’s philosophy. Better than “ontology,” the word “metaphysics” expresses the transcending movement of a thinking that goes beyond the realm of being. Indeed, if we accept Heidegger’s interpretation of the Greek *physis*, it should not be translated by the word “nature” but rather by “being.” Insofar as it grants to all beings their emergence and unfolding into the truth of their phenomenality, the *physis* is the all-embracing source to which all beings owe their coming to the fore. According to Levinas, however, the ultimate toward which all thought and existence are oriented coincides neither with any being nor with the totality of all beings nor with being as that which gives them generation, growth, and corruption. The ultimate does not manifest itself to a *logos* whose perspectives are confined to the horizons of beingness and being; in order to be heard or contacted, it demands another transcendence; and another beyond.

Just as Heidegger’s thought of being cannot be understood if it is cut off from the classical texts and traditions present in

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its retrievals, Levinas’s philosophy cannot be separated from its polemical connections with Western ontology and its greatest contemporary representative in particular. An intrinsic reason for this lies in the impossibility of simply rejecting or abolishing ontology, since it is an essential element of all philosophy. This statement, in which I summarize a connection that—as I will argue below—underlies many passages of Levinas’s work, sounds rather Hegelian. Did Hegel not understand every single philosophy of the past as a necessary but partial half-truth, the real truth being possible only as the ultimate whole of all truth(s)? In order to become truly (i.e., fully) true, every single philosophy had to be integrated, subordinated, relativized, and thus redeemed from its falsehood by becoming a functional moment of the complete and final truth, which is represented in the absolute knowledge of the ultimate philosophy. Levinas’s “integration” of ontology, however, differs no less from Hegel’s Aufhebung than from Heidegger’s retrieval. More than Heidegger’s thought, Hegel’s systematic “completion” of Western philosophy is the symbol and summary of the Western tradition. This may be the reason why Levinas sometimes seems to Hegelianize Heidegger’s thought. If, however, this impression were the whole truth about Levinas’s interpretation of Heidegger, the question would arise whether they are not allies in their anti-Hegelian attempt to renew the paths of philosophy, or even whether Levinas does not simply continue Heidegger’s search for a beyond of totality.

I Phenomenology

Husserl’s renewal of philosophy through phenomenology can be summarized in the word “intentionality.” He saw not only that all consciousness is a cogito of something (cogitatum), but also that the intentional structure of consciousness cannot be characterized as the relation between a representing subject and objects met by that subject. Feeling, walking, desiring, ruminating, eating, drinking, hammering are also intentions—or rather clusters of intentions, related in a specific, nonrepresentational way to specific correlates. The task of philosophy involves the intentional analysis of all the modes of phenomenality in which the whole variety of different intentions is given to consciousness, that is, it involves an adequate description of their givenness and peculiar structure. Such analyses show that every single intention is composed of, supported by, and embedded in other intentions, whose interwovenness with yet other intentions should be analyzed in their turn. A complete analysis would reveal the specificity of all real, necessary, and possible
phenomena in their correlatedness to all the real, necessary, and possible intentions constituting human consciousness. Since nothing can be given outside of those intentional correlates, such an analysis would encompass a complete description of an all-embracing consciousness and of the totality of all beings capable of manifesting themselves. The criterion for the authenticity and truth of all statements that can be justified on the basis of this approach to the phenomena is the evidence of their being given in “bodily presence.” The impossibility of denying the immediate experience of their givenness was considered the solid rock on which Husserlian phenomenology established its hope for the final promotion of philosophy to the dignity of a valid and rigorous science.

Although Husserl recognized the fact that, in addition to objectifying, presenting, and representing intentions, consciousness is also constituted by affective and practical intentions, he maintained—at least in his earlier works—the primordial and exemplary role of the theoretical or “doxic” intentions. Notwithstanding his effort to purify consciousness from all contingent and particular features in order to reach a truly transcendental perspective, consciousness remained primarily a panoramic review of the universe as a presently given, remembered, or anticipated world of phenomena. All forms of nontranscendental consciousness were parts of this universe, and the spirit of this phenomenology remained faithful to the modern urge for autonomy. Following the path of Descartes and Hegel, it strove toward the absolute self-possession of a transcendental ego including the truth of all that is given in the knowledge of itself.

An extension of the structure of doxic intentions to other species of intentionality by additional analyses of emotional experiences—as Max Scheler presented—is not a sufficient remedy against the “egological” illusions of Husserlian phenomenology. Affective and emotional intentions, too, can be interpreted as partial structures of a universe that opens up for a central and all-encompassing consciousness. However, the experience of our existence shows that consciousness is never so universal as to embrace also its own being and beginning. Besides an element of self-consciousness, every single experience includes also the acceptance of a surprising element that is irreducible to a spontaneous production by ego itself. And not only knowledge but all intentions and consciousness as such affirm the surprising otherness of an a posteriori element that cannot be reduced to a moment of the cogito or its well-controlled panorama. Self-consciousness discovers itself as an original and irreducible relation to some “other” that it can neither absorb nor posit by its own, a priori, capacities. The origin is not to be
found in a transcendental ego; it is the absoluteness of an ultimate relation.

Heidegger’s transformation of phenomenology has taught us that consciousness is rooted in deeper levels of being-there that precede all sorts of objectifying knowledge and representation. Hammering, caring, being busy, being thrilled, etc., are specific ways of understanding the being of beings before any thematization. Dasein is openness and transcendence toward the truth of beings; it is enlightened by the original light that allows them to appear. The understanding of being implied in our ways of existence is the horizon that allows the coming into being and the phenomenality of all phenomena and their interwovenness.

Notwithstanding Heidegger’s constant insistence on the distinction between the totality of beings (das Seiende im Ganzen) and being (Sein) itself, and notwithstanding his contrasting Dasein with the autonomous subject of modern philosophy, Levinas is convinced that Heidegger in the end does not escape from the totalitarian and egological tendencies of the Western tradition.

A first line of attack characterizes Heidegger’s thought as an attempt to identify the ultimate instance as an all-embracing horizon. Although Levinas, at least in some oral discussions, clearly stated that Heidegger’s Sein does not signify a totality, various passages of his work seem to say or suggest that being is so intimately united with the universe of beings that it cannot be freed from its totalitarian character. As an all-encompassing horizon within which all beings (humans, gods, and God included) are allowed to be, being is the ultimate “universal.” Even if it were possible to distinguish it from beings and their inherent beingness without making being itself into an ultimate, originary, and fundamental being, it would not be possible, according to Levinas, to conceive of it as a nontotalizing instance.

In this discussion, the ontological difference is at stake. Can we distinguish clearly between beings (including the modes of their being) and being itself? In the first chapters of Autrement qu’être, Levinas, through an original retrieval of Heidegger’s thought, gives his own interpretation of the beingness of being; but neither there nor in Totalité et Infini does it seem to be different from the beingness of beings (to on héi on). In evoking

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43 For example, in a seminar we gave in May 1983 at the Napolitan Instituto Italiano di Filosofia. In the fifth “Conclusion” of Totalité et Infini (270/294-95), Levinas seems to affirm very clearly that Heidegger’s ontology is a panoramic thought and a philosophy of totality.
Heidegger’s ontology, Levinas most often uses the word “être” to indicate two things at once: (1) that by which all beings are given as what and how they are ("being itself"), and (2) (the whole of) reality as such, that is, (all) beings insofar as they exist. If the distinction between these two cannot be made in a comprehensible way, how then can we escape from identifying being as the monistic horizon or source of universal participation?

More detailed study of the relationship between Heidegger and Levinas must revise, correct, and refine the summary given here as a provisional orientation. By way of anticipation, it might be stated already that the very perspectives of both authors are so radical and so radically different that it may remain doubtful whether we can understand their thoughts as answers to one and the same question.

In Levinas’s view, the central and all-mastering position of the modern ego is retained in Heidegger’s analysis of Dasein, notwithstanding its profound transformation of all former philosophy of consciousness. Even if it is true that the fundamental “passivity” of Befindlichkeit, mortality, and contingency is stressed and that Heidegger attributes the initiative of discovery and truth more and more to being itself, the subject of acceptance and “letting-be” is still the center of a panoramic universe, an open space well protected against invasions and disruptions by other humans, other histories, or God. If gods exist, they are there for men. Other humans are mentioned only as companions within anonymous communities, not as disturbing forces that rob me of my central place.

Heidegger’s radicalization of phenomenology has established the domination of the most radical and original of all intentions: the essence of the human “being-there” is transcendence toward the granting clearing of being, to which all phenomena owe their truth. From the “beginning,” “always already” (je schon), all beings are caught in the fundamental understanding of a subject that, thereby, has “always already” been familiar to them. According to Levinas, Heidegger’s insistence on this prepredicative familiarity is a new version of Plato’s interpretation of knowledge as remembrance (anamnesis) and of Hegel’s claim that the core of all empirical givenness can be deduced from self-evident principles.44

Besides the rather abstract considerations just summarized, Levinas’s oeuvre contains passages in which he attacks certain analyses of Heidegger from a strictly phenomenological point of view. Levinas understands Heidegger’s attempt to

think being in the light of the expression *es gibt* (the normal German equivalent of the English “there is” and the French “*il y a*”) as the celebration of a profound generosity by which being would bestow light, freedom, truth, and splendor to all beings. *Il y a* does not, however, strike Levinas as particularly generous but rather as an indeterminate, shapeless, colorless, chaotic, and dangerous “rumbling and rustling.” The confrontation with its anonymous force generates neither light nor freedom but rather terror as a loss of selfhood. Immersion in the lawless chaos of “there is” would be equivalent to the absorption by a depersonalizing realm of pure materiality. With regard to this “being,” the first task and desire is to escape or “evade” it (cf. “On Escape”). The source of true light, meaning, and truth can only be found in something “other” than it. 

In his new preface to the 1978 reprint of *De l’existence à l’existant*, first published in 1946, Levinas singles the description of “there is” out as a portion of his former thought that he still defends. Without rejecting his former description, he describes the essence of being in *Autrement qu’être* (1974) as an “interesse” or “interestedness” that rules all beings, while connecting them together by a reciprocally interested self-interest. Positing every being as a center for itself, it is through their performance of being, characterized by Spinoza as a *conatus essendi*, that all beings participate in one community of self-preservation. Being as a universal interestedness makes all beings, and especially the living ones, mutually competitive and dependent. Their needs relate them to one another and create an “economic” system of mutual satisfaction as well as a political network of resistance, tension, hostility, and war for the sake of self-satisfaction. Ruled by universal interest, human history is an alternation of war and truce on the basis of needs.

### Otherness

The preceding pages have argued that if all knowledge presupposes the experience of something that can be neither given nor wholly integrated by consciousness as such, then there must be something other than being. Against the thesis that all truths and values can ultimately be reduced to the transcendental activity of an autonomous subject, Levinas insists forcefully on
the irreducible moments of heteronomy. Instead of seeing all realities as unfolding or surrounding elements of one basic and central instance called “the Same,” which realizes itself by appropriating them, the irreducibility of Otherness must be recognized. This recognition supplants the overt or hidden monism of ontology by a pluralism whose basic ground model is the relation of the Same (le Même) and the Other (l’Autre).

The otherness of the Other is concretized in the face of another human. The proof for Levinas’s basic “principle” lies in the most ordinary, simple, and everyday fact of another facing me. I can see another as someone I need in order to realize certain wants of mine. She or he is then a useful or enjoyable part of my world, with a specific role and function. We all belong to different communities, in which we function more or less well on the basis of reciprocal needs. I can also observe another from an aesthetic perspective, for example, by looking at the color of her eyes, the proportions of his face, and so on. But none of these ways of perception allows the otherness of the other to reveal itself. All aspects manifested by a phenomenological description that starts from these perspectives are immediately integrated by my self-centered, interested, and dominating consciousness. These ways of looking at them transform the phenomena into moments of my material or spiritual property. The sort of phenomenology based on these and similar observations is a form of egology.

Another comes to the fore as other if and only if his or her “appearance” breaks, pierces, destroys the horizon of my egocentric monism, that is, when the other’s invasion of my world destroys the empire in which all phenomena are, from the outset, a priori, condemned to function as moments of my universe. The other’s face (i.e., any other’s facing me) or the other’s speech (i.e., any other’s speaking to me) interrupts and disturbs the order of my, ego’s world; it makes a hole in it by disarraying my arrangements without ever permitting me to restore the previous order. For even if I kill the other or chase the other away in order to be safe from the intrusion, nothing will ever be the same as before.

When Levinas meditates on the significance of the face, he does not describe the complex figure that could be portrayed by a picture or painting; rather, he tries to make us “experience” or “realize” what we see, feel, “know” when another, by looking at me, “touches” me: autrui me vise; the other’s visage looks at me, “regards” me. Similarly the word “language,” often used in this context, evokes the speech addressed to me by some living man or woman and not the linguistic structures or anonymous meanings that can be studied objectively or practiced by a style-con-
scious author. *Au vrai me parle*" primordially, it is not important what is said: even if the words are nonsensical, there is still their being addressed. Neither is it relevant who speaks to me; any other is the revelation of the Other, and peculiar features deserving special attention would only lead me away from the “absolute otherness” that is at stake. In order to concentrate on the other’s otherness, Levinas often stresses the nakedness of the other’s face: if I am touched, if I am conscious of being concerned, it is not because of the other’s beauty, talents, performances, roles, or functions but only by the other’s (human) otherness.

As disrupting the horizon of my egological—and thus, ontological—ways of handling and seeing the world, the others resist a description that would present them as a particular sort of phenomenon among other phenomena within a universal order of beings. Since they “show” and “present” precisely those realities that do not fit into the universal openness of consciousness, they cannot be seized by the usual categories and models of phenomenology. The other transcends the limits of (self-)consciousness and its horizon; the look and the voice that surprise me are “too much” for my capacity of assimilation. In this sense, the other comes toward me as a total stranger and from a dimension that surpasses me. The otherness of the other reveals a dimension of “height” (*hauteur*): he/she comes “from on high.”

Husserl’s theory of intentionality, based on an adequate and symmetric correlation between noésis and noéma, no longer fits. A forgotten element of Descartes’s analysis of consciousness, however, offers a formal structure much closer to the relation meant by Levinas. According to Descartes’ third *Metaphysical Meditation*, all human consciousness contains not only and not primarily the idea of itself but also and precedingly the irreducible “idea of the infinite,” that is, an immediate and *a priori* given relation of the conscious subject to a reality that can neither be constituted nor embraced by this subject. This means that the cogito from the outset is structured by a bipolarity other than the bipolarity of the noetico-noematic relation of phenomenology, in which an idea and its ideatum fit one another adequately. Descartes still knew (as all great metaphysicians before him) that consciousness “thinks more than [or beyond] that which it can think.” The infinite is different from any noéma or cogitatum, for it essentially surpasses our capacity for conception and embracing. Although Descartes identifies “the infinite” with “God” (i.e., the God of the traditional, late scholastic philosophy), we can consider the formal structure he discovers to be the structure of my relation to the other in the form of another human being. When I am confronted with another,
I experience myself as an instance that tries to appropriate the world by labor, language, and experience, whereas this other instance does not permit me to monopolize the world because the Other’s greatness does not fit into any enclosure—not even that of theoretical comprehension. This resistance to all integration is not founded on the other’s will; before any possibility of choice and before all psychological considerations, the mere fact of another’s existence is a “surplus” that cannot be reduced to becoming a part or moment of the Same. The Other cannot be captured or grasped and is therefore, in the most literal sense of the word, incomprehensible.

In all his works, Levinas has endeavored to show that the (human) other radically differs from all other beings in the world. The other’s coming to the fore cannot be seen as a variation of the general way of appearance by which all other beings are phenomenal. This is the reason why Levinas reserves the word “phenomenon” for realities that fit into the totality of beings ruled by egological understanding. Since the other cannot become a moment of such a totality, it is not a phenomenon but rather an “enigma.” However, if an enigma cannot be defined in phenomenological terms, we must ask: can it be defined at all? If “visibility,” in a broad and metaphorical sense, is a feature of every being that can become a phenomenon, one may even call the enigmatic other “invisible.”

The other imposes its exceptional and enigmatic otherness on me by way of a command and a prohibition: you are not allowed to kill me; you must accord me a place under the sun and everything that is necessary to live a truly human life! Your facing me or your speaking to me—whatever form your addressing me might take—forbids me to suppress, enslave, or damage you; on the contrary, it obligates me to dedicate myself to your well-being. It is not your will or want or wish that makes me yours truly, but your emerging, your being there, as such. Independently of your or my desires, your presence reveals to me that I am “for you,” responsible for your life.

We meet here an exceptional, extraordinary, and absolute fact: a fact that is and exists simultaneously and necessarily as a fact and as a command or norm. By seeing another looking at me, or by hearing someone’s voice, I “know” myself to be obliged. The scission between factuality (is) and normativity (ought)—a scission many philosophers since Hume have believed in—has not yet had the time to emerge here. The immediate experience of another’s emergence contains the root of all possible ethics as

47 Cf., e.g., TI 4 (TaI 34). See also “Enigme et Phénomène,” in En découvrant, 203-217 (CPP 61-74).
well as the source from which all insights of theoretical philosophy must start. The other’s existence as such reveals to me the basis and primary sense of my obligations.

The abstract structure that was opposed to the tautology of egocentric monism has now been concretized into a relation between the selfhood of an ego and the otherness of the other person who comes toward this ego. This relation posits a certain connection still to be qualified, but also a separation. The latter is necessary in order to avoid the consequence that the independence and difference of both the other and me are drowned in a fusion, or “lifted up” into a higher unity. The connection lies in the fact that the other’s emergence answers the deepest desire that motivates me.

At first, the statement that the commanding and demanding Other corresponds to my deepest desire—and thus is the most desirable for me—must surprise. Can an imperative that makes me the other’s servant be experienced as desirable? Does my desire not desire my own fulfillment, satisfaction, and pleasure or joy? Can obligations provide these? Do they not rather, as Kant so often stated, cause humiliation, pain, and dissatisfaction?

The argument of Totality and the Infinite begins with an analysis of desire and the movement it motivates. We will analyze that analysis, but here a brief provisional hint seems needed. Levinas contrasts desire with need. Needs encompass not only hunger and thirst, but also many other wants and drives that motivate certain activities. Aesthetic and spiritual pursuits, for example, also move us from a lack or privation toward satisfaction and fulfillment. Although, in the first pages of TI, Levinas alludes to Plato’s analyses of Erōs in the Banquet and the Phaedrus, where the lover’s fulfillment and joy seem to be constitutive of the desired end, we will see that Totality and Infinity rather should be read as a treatise about conversion from a basic, egocentric Need to an outer-directed, even more fundamental Desire, which dedicates, offers, and empties the Desiring self in the name of its dedication to the well-being of others. According to Levinas, true Desire is not a need; it is not focused on self-satisfaction, not even in the form of one’s own salvation, but it does desire something absolute, “something” that cannot be subordinated to—or even compared with—anything else. Desire is too deep and too empty ever to be fully satisfied. Its “hunger” grows to the extent that it comes nearer to the desirable. The most radical Desire is “a hunger that feeds
on itself.” It points to an absolute that does not fit into the “comprehensive” capacity of the desiring subject. The answer given by the absolute, in the form of the “invisible” other, is not a kind of satisfaction but instead an infinite task: the task of my responsibility toward everyone I shall ever meet.

The dissatisfaction of this Desire with all finite and visible phenomena shows its absoluteness. It is a Desire for the Absolute. This is another reason why Levinas characterizes it as Desire for “the invisible” and why he calls the desired absolute “infinite,” but we must still discover what “infinity” and “invisibility” in this context mean.

“Desire” is another name for human “transcendence,” if we understand this as a reaching out toward that which is absolutely or irreducibly other and exterior to the form and content of a human “interiority.” The desired desirableness cannot become part of an egocentric life. Desire opens the dimension that Levinas, in the subtitle of TI, evokes by the word “exteriority,” as contrasted with the self-enclosed “interiority” of an ego that does not accept its “pre-original” transcendence to the other.”

To Desire is to be toward and to live for the Other, and this involves a limitless responsibility. But to endure my responsibility for others, I must be someone: an independent being with an initiative and a concrete existence of its own. What are the conditions for this independence? In the unfolding of his answer to this question, Levinas proceeds like an accomplished phenomenologist. He analyzes thoroughly the intentions through which the I is constituted as an independent subject or “self.” In doing so, he criticizes the Heideggerian analyses of Dasein’s being-in-the-world, as found in Sein und Zeit. Human selfhood is due to a specific way of commerce with the surrounding reality: to be an ego means to rise out of the elements and dominate them from an independent perspective, for example by consuming or using parts of the world by eating, washing, inhabiting, etc. The character of my commerce with “terrestrial food” is not primarily utilitarian, however. The world is not primarily a context of useful tools and referential networks but rather a milieu in which we establish ourselves to enjoy the pleasures it offers. We stand on the earth and walk from place to place; we bathe in water, air, and light. Food and drink are enjoyed, not primarily sought out of rational considerations but because they are good, that is, pleasurable. If we did not establish a home in which to dwell, we would be lost and without orientation. Only a dwelling—which fits no better than food and beverage into Heidegger’s category of the “ready-to-hand”—enables us to

48 TI 1-2 (TaI 33-34).
settle and to labor. Regular work would not be possible were there not at the same time a kind of immersion in the environment and a certain distance with regard to material reality. The latter enables us to objectify the world, but all objectification presupposes that we are already settled and, to a certain extent, familiar with the world. Objectification is made explicit and thematized in scientific considerations of the reality, but it emerges from a primary kind of osmosis with the world.

The description of “being in the world,” as given in *Totality and Infinity*, has features of an earthly paradise. To love and to enjoy the earth, by eating, drinking, dwelling, etc., are activities that have not drawn much attention from Western philosophers. By way of his phenomenology of terrestrial existence in light of an all-embracing hedonism, Levinas shows that our search for happiness is not bad but rather a necessary condition of the possibility of the self-possession through which the I acquires its autonomous substantiality. In this still-solitary dimension, the law of life is: Enjoy life and enjoy the earth as much as possible.

Appropriation, integration, and assimilation are constitutive, and thus necessary, elements of any concrete human individuality. It would be possible to systematize Levinas’s descriptions of this existential dimension and to range all the aspects thus revealed as organized elements of an ontological hierarchy, but such an encyclopedic enterprise is not the purpose of his phenomenological style. It is thus not immediately clear from his texts how exactly the bathing in the elements of light, water, and air relates to our immersion in the “there is” (*il y a*). After opening up new paths, Levinas attempts again and again to determine how he can hold them open and prolong or adjust them. He also asks how different paths may converge or meet, but his goal is not the full description of a complete map wherein all ways and crossings have received their proper assignments and proportions. Although certain sorts of totality are good and necessary, Levinas is much more concerned about the relevance of the Other’s disruption of all horizons than about the systematic construction of a well-articulated universe.

Through his analyses of a paradise-like existence, which fill a large part of *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas legitimizes the egocentrism that is at the heart of all hedonisms. The enjoyment of a corporeal and terrestrial existence is constitutive for any ego: the I establishes itself as a self through the absorption of elements, things, and events or by submitting them to the I’s domination and possession. Without this appropriating and hedonic egocentrism, there would be no relationship to other persons because this relation presupposes a basic level of individual independence, even if further analysis will show the relativity of
this independence. An encounter of unfree, wholly dependent
and in this sense selfless beings can result only in fusion or
confusion. To the extent that the world of dwelling, eating and
drinking, sleeping, working, and so on, satisfies the needs of the
ego and confirms its position of ruler and owner, it can be called,
in a broad sense of the word, the world of “economy.” The law
(nomos) by which this dimension is ruled is the law of being in
the world as being in one’s own home (oikos).

A human being is, however, more than a cluster of needs
and more than a being (feeling, acting, etc.) at home. Desire
points beyond the horizon of “economy.” That is why the legiti-
mization of egocentric hedonism is not absolute but relative. If
it does not submit itself to a higher law, it loses its innocence.
The consciousness of an ego protecting itself against all non-
“economical” realities is a bad conscience (mauvaise conscience),
because the encounter with another reveals the supreme law:
my selfhood must bow before the absoluteness revealed in an-
other’s look or speech. My home, my food and beverage, my
labor, all my possessions and delights receive their definitive
meaning by being put into the serve of others who, by their
unchosen “height,” make me responsible. All commandments
together form one single order: the other makes me accountable
for his life. I must feed my body and arrange my house in order
to receive the foreigner who knocks at my door. If I possess a
home, it is not for me alone. Expressions such as “After you”
or “Make yourself at home” say quite well that the person who
enters is received and respected as Other. “Here I am” does not,
then signify that I am the most important being of the world,
but on the contrary, that I am at your disposal. The French “me
voici” expresses it much better by putting the “I” in the oblique
form. Indeed, the entering of another in “my” world produces
suffering for me, if I have abandoned myself wholly to hedo-
nism. The claims implied in the Other’s existence put limits on
my right to satisfy myself. These limits are so exorbitant that
they even threaten to reduce my claims to zero. Insofar as I am
still imprisoned in the dream of my paradise-like innocence, the
Other awakens, accuses, and judges me.

The absoluteness revealed in the other’s visage causes an
earthquake in my existence. The justification of my nestling in
the world—and of the appropriation, labor, and consumption by
which it is accompanied—does not lie in the necessity of my sat-
isfaction but in the dedication to others that thereby becomes
possible. To realize my responsibility for the Other, I myself
must be independent; but the deeper meaning of my selfhood
is my being-for-the-Other. The law before which my economi-
cal existence must bow is not primarily the autonomy of my
own reasonability; neither is it the voice of being that summons me to obey; nor is it a range of prescriptions that would have descended from heaven. It is the life of the Other who, as a foreigner, disrupts my being at home in the world as if I were its “master and possessor,” who enjoys his solitary and premoral self.

| The-One-for-the-Other |

From the perspective of the “metaphysical relation” (as Levinas calls the pre-chosen and “pre-original” relation between the Other and the self), which has thus replaced the foundation (arche) or the principle (primum principium) sought by philosophy from its Greek beginning, Levinas has developed a very original interpretation of human existence and, in the first place, of the human subject, which since Descartes has been primarily understood as an ego or an I. In contrast with those French philosophers who resolutely abolished human subjectivity and autonomy without wondering whether the traditional way of problematizing them perhaps should not rather be transformed, Levinas tries to show that the human self (le soi or le moi) has a structure other than the one that was presupposed by the tradition.

Oriented by the Desire that directs me to the Other, and thus by the Other whom I cannot assimilate, I am a human body of flesh and blood, simultaneously independent and pertaining to the Other. Only on the basis of this double-sided fact—but not as the most radical truth—can a human being be defined as a “living being that is reasonable” or as a “unity of body and spiritual soul.” The whole of my concrete—corporeal, sensible, kinetic, emotional, contemplative, striving—existence is determined by my orientation toward the Other: I am demanded, occupied, obsessed, and inspired by the Other. As a partial elaboration of this thesis, Totality and Infinity and Otherwise Than Being offer extensive and refined analyses of human corporeality and sensibility not contaminated by any dualism. From the outset, being human is a concrete and physical sensitivity to the claims revealed by the Other, a being-delivered to the Other and even a substitute. Since the fact of others’ existence makes me infinitely responsible, I am a hostage even before I may know it. The accusative of the accusation in which I find myself when I try to live for myself alone reveals itself in the unrest of a bad conscience. If I open myself to the Other’s speech, the meaning of that accusative changes, although I must continue to plead guilty because I will never completely perform my endless obligation. As hostage and substitute, I am no longer master of
the situation but vulnerable and persecuted by the fact of the Other’s claims.

No more than the body is “the spirit” a distinct part of a composition called “man.” Corporeality, to have giving hands and a consoling mouth, is itself the concrete way of being human, that is, of being-for-the-Other; and spirit is nothing other than the inspiration thanks to which corporeal existence has a meaning.

The consequences that this overcoming of dualism has for philosophical anthropology, and especially for a philosophy of the senses and feelings, are not yet fully seen. In this point, a certain affinity with Heidegger is undeniable, although the latter did not give much attention to the simplest aspects of everyday life, such as eating and drinking. A great difference lies, however, in the fact that Levinas insists on the primordially moral meaning of human life, whereas Heidegger concentrates on the contemplative and poetic aspects.

| Equality and Asymmetry |

A first, rather obvious objection raised in various forms by readers and nonreaders of Levinas says: If it is true that the existence of another human being makes me infinitely responsible for him or her, this thesis is also valid for everyone other than me; everybody is an I for whom I and all other humans are others. All human beings are therefore equally and reciprocally commanding and serving one another: everyone is master and servant at the same time.

This objection is formulated from a perspective that places itself outside or above the relation of the other(s) and me: it considers all others and me as similar cases of one and the same species or genus of beings: both (or all of us) are human beings, who, as humans, appear to one another (and to all people) as commanding and demanding beings. It is, indeed, possible—it is even inevitable—that we treat the relation between you and me as a singular case of the universal concept “interhuman relationship” and that we look at human individuals as singularizations of a universal “essence”: being human.

All the works of Levinas testify to this possibility, which is a necessity. By thematizing all here-and-now concrete realities, the language of reflective discourse transforms them into single cases of general possibilities. Not always, however, does the content of such a discourse—its “Said” (le dit)—adequately render what it wants to say. What Levinas tries most of all to express in the “Said” of his writings is the unicity of a unique experience that cannot be universalized: I—not an other ego, but I myself, named so and so, born there and then, having lived until
now this life story in connection with these and those relations, friends, etc., who here-and-now, in these particular and contingent situations—find myself confronted with, and thereby occupied, demanded, and obsessed by, this Other here-and-now. But is this sentence itself not a statement that can be applied to all egos, among which I am only one case of “ego¬ness”? Indeed, I should have written: “I, Adriaan Peperzak” and so on, by way of a summary pointing at the unrepeatable features of one unique life. But are there unique features? And if I write such a phrase—not by way of promise, contract, or vow but in a philosophical treatise on ethics (which might be an ethics in the situational style)—have I not already betrayed the intention of saying something unique? By using such a phrase as an example, I state through it a general truth valid for any ego. What I say in recognizing my being-for-you and your having rights on me is thematized and thereby changed into a universal truth as soon as I write down “I,” “here,” “now,” thus,” “am obligated,” you,” and so on.

When we read Levinas’s writing about the unicity of a singular Other or a singular I that cannot be universalized, we understand what he wants to express, but at the same time we are aware of the abyss that separates the Said, which sounds like a universal truth, from the experience of Levinas’s discovering himself as the one who is totally and uniquely responsible for a determinate Other, who also, but in a different way (as putting obligations on Levinas), is unique. The generalizing language of the thematizing discourse that has become the language of philosophy is not able to express the uniqueness of such a unique experience.

Levinas calls the uniqueness of my (or your) being responsible for the Other an “election.” I have been chosen, neither by myself nor by another’s will or decision but by some no-thing that “speaks” to me through the Other who shows me his or her face. I have been chosen to be responsible for anybody I shall meet. I cannot refuse this election, for it has appointed me as an irreplaceable servant who cannot put this—my—burden on others. The Other’s existence reveals to me a unique task, which constitutes the meaning of my life. Only through reflection—and not by way of immediate experience—do I discover that every human being experiences the same responsibility as I do and that I, too—not through any willing but by simply being there—impose an infinite responsibility on each one of them. The discovery of our similarity in this respect—and therewith the thought of a fundamental equality between myself and all other people—is the fruit of a reflective comparison; it is not simultaneous with, but comes after, the revelation of a more origi-
nal asymmetry. This original asymmetry cannot be erased and should not be obscured or forgotten by concentration on the secondary truth of our equality. Like all people, I can and must be seen as a replaceable instance of one universal “being-human” (cf. Kant’s *Menschheit*), but universal equality masks the more original asymmetry that relates me to you.

Levinas has tried more than once to cope with the objection exposed above: “It is not I, but the other, who must state and recognize his or her infinite responsibility toward me.” For now it may suffice, however, to stress the core of the issue. This lies in the difference between, on the one hand, the recognition in the first person of my responsibility—I and only I am responsible for any other—and the universal imperative, on the other hand, formulated from an Archimedean point of view unengaged in the situation, the body, and the time in which I, here and now, without choosing them (“malgré moi”, as Levinas often writes), find myself involved. The radical standpoint that I can neither abolish nor deny (although I can forget, ignore, or neglect it) is my being claimed and taken hostage by the Other with whom I, quite contingently, happen to meet. I discover myself as radically different from any other, namely as a “me” in the oblique, subjected to and unable to escape from my being regarded, touched, and put under obligations by my encounters.

The “passivity” involved in this structure is opposed to a way of being that could be characterized as an autonomous initiative or self-projection. My speaking, for example, is not primarily a magisterial discourse in which I expose my themes from an all-encompassing or transcendental perspective. On the contrary, as a speech through which I express my high esteem for my interlocutor, it does not permit me to submit its upward direction to a superior overview of our relation and my speech: my addressing the Other is an “apo-logy.” In talking to someone, I cannot detach myself from the speech that expresses my dedication. I am not capable of leaving behind or overcoming my finite and obligated selfhood by a transcendental stepping back that would position me as a master of the game that plays between us.

In *Otherwise Than Being*, Levinas insists on the inner coherence between the fundamental passivity at the bottom of substitution and suffering for another, on the one hand, and the Saying (*le dire*) that precedes and never coincides with any Said (*le dit*), on the other. In complete distinction from those who are inclined to see language as an anonymous power not only ruling but also producing all writings and speeches of all (pseudo-)authors, Levinas insists on the absolute irreducibility and incomprehensibility of speaking as such, in which something—someone—comes to the fore “before” its Said is understood. Speaking
itself cannot be defined or determined as a content ("said") within the framework of conceptual discourse. It is surely possible to talk to a speaker in order to reach him or her through language, but that by which the other is someone evaporates as soon as my language thematizes the utterance of a speech.

Whereas the Saying breaks all the limits of philosophical language, the Said belongs to the dimension of things that are objectifiable. Among them are also the technical, the political, and the aesthetic works and performances through which people realize history. The Other, the Self, and Speaking, however, cannot enter the realm of the Sayable because in all their vulnerability and humility they are too originary for a thetic thought that would try to thematize them. And yet we hear them continuously. Before a philosopher submits the Other, herself, or speaking to the categories and structures of her discourse but also in the course of her reflection, there is, behind her reflecting consciousness, an "I" that addresses itself through that reflection. Speaking addresses itself to listeners, presenting them with certain contents ("Saids") that can be objectified and talked about, but the horizon formed by you who listen to me, and by me who speak to you, cannot be surpassed by the horizon of a universe in which you and I are parts or participants only. All linguistic totalities are transcended by and owe their existence to, the relation of speaking—a relation that escapes all attempts to reduce speech to an object, a topic, or a theme.

| Intersubjectivity and Society |

A second objection often made against Levinas's insistence on the relation of you and me can be stated in the following way: If the existence of one Other already condemns me to an unlimited responsibility and dedication, how, then, can I cope with the fact that I, during my lifetime, am confronted not only with one or a few men, women, and children, but with innumerable others?

This difficulty, too, presupposes a point of view that is no longer confined to the unique relation of me-here-and-now to this unique other here-and-now. The objection is therefore a particular version of a fundamental question perhaps never answered in a satisfactory way: How exactly are face-to-face relations related to collective structures?

Classical social philosophy has always seen people as real or potential parts, role takers, functionaries, or citizens of different sorts of social formations. In developing a theory of society, the philosopher (just like his reader or student) is present twice: once as one of the constitutive elements of the social whole upon which he is reflecting, and a second time as the master of a
conceptual game, that is, as an imaginary and theoretical summit from which that social whole is unrolled. If he, for example, stresses the equality of all human beings, he maintains, in addition to his equality as fellow person, the inequality of himself and the others, since he sits at the top, overseeing the human community of which he, with and like all others, is a part. This view does not do justice to the structure of the intersubjective relation described above, in which I am the servant and “subject” of the Other. And yet such a panoramic overview is—for Levinas too—inevitable and beneficial if limited to a certain dimension. The moral perspective itself, the very relation of intersubjective asymmetry, not only demands an infinite respect for somebody who confronts me as (a) You; it also imposes a general care for all human others whose face and word I cannot perceive personally.

We cannot claim that Levinas has deduced a complete social philosophy from the intersubjective relation he analyzed so often and so well. Neither does one find in his numerous publications an exhaustive treatment of the relations between the intersubjective relation and the categories of social and political life. He does, however, give a number of important indications for the determination of those relations.

Already in “The Ego and the Totality” (1954) Levinas stated that the encounter with the Other cannot limit itself to the intimacy of love because this would exclude all people except my intimate friends from my attention and responsibility. Other others stand beside and behind this unique other who obliges me here and now through his or her presence. Since the obligation is not attached to any particular feature of this other but only to his or her entrance into my world, all others oblige me as much as this one. In this other’s face, I see the virtual presence of all men and women. Since I cannot, however, behave in any concrete way as everybody’s servant, the situation makes it necessary for me to gather all others by means of a universal category that allows me to speak about them in general terms.

It is, however not enough to speak about all humans; we are urged to take measures and to follow rules according to which the concrete dedication of everyone to all others will be realized. This demands a social organization—Levinas often uses here the word “administration”—in which mutual respect and equality of rights are guaranteed by mores and other institutions. At this point, Levinas’s thinking converges with the mainstream of modern social philosophy. But the inspiration of his thought and his philosophical legitimation of a just and liberal society find their source exclusively in the original relationship of the—(unique)-one-for-the—(unique)-Other, that is, in the moral
 Administration and politics have their true source in the absolute esteem of individuals for other individuals. All social tasks are consequences of, and preparations for, the possibility of adequate face-to-face relationships and good conversations. If they are not directed toward this end, collective measures lose their human meaning because they have forgotten or masked real faces and real speech. This forgetfulness is the beginning of tyranny. If the infinite dignity of concrete individuals whom we love has been obscured, the only outcomes are universal war in the name of innumerable conflicting needs, or the dictatorship of an ego who happens to be the handiest of all, or an inhuman system in which war and dictatorship are repressed and outbalanced by other aggressors no less fond of one day becoming dictators in their turn.

| Language and Thought |

In rendering some central topics of Levinas’s philosophy, I have borrowed many key terms from the tradition of Western ontology, such as fundament, principle, origin, and so on. Levinas, too, has used similar terms in his writings. Totality and Infinity, for example, abounds in such words as “experience,” “being,” “phenomena,” “absolute,” “the infinite,” etc. In later works, he tries to avoid, as much as possible, the terminology of ontology and those thoughts that can hardly be separated from it. Due to this attempt, Otherwise Than Being has become a book exceptional in its surprising categories and language. From the perspective of this later development, Levinas deems his earlier work until and including Totality and Infinity to be “still too ontological.” Yet there is no radical abyss between the two main books—and we cannot speak of a real “turn”—but rather a difference of degree. Even in the later writings, ontological language and conceptuality are still irresistible: as long as we philosophize, they seem to confirm their universal domination. Moreover in earlier works, too, we are confronted with flashes of “heterology” that break away from the armature of ontological and phenomenological language.

In calling the relation to the Other the “principle” or the “fundament” of this philosophy, we connect it with a whole constellation of foundational concepts characteristic of the way in which thought has been practiced since Plato and Aristotle. Western thinking has always been a questioning from the perspective of possible foundation, principle, origins, or grounds. Using the Greek word archē (beginning, principle, “ground,” or that from which something “starts”), we could characterize that way of thought as an “archeology.” A thought that would not fol-
low its patterns and methods could then be called “groundless” or “an-archical.” In this sense, Levinas’s thought is a philosophy of anarchy.

Levinas’s critique of the primacy of foundational thought is part of his attack on the conviction that the human universe could be summarized by reconstructing it as a panoramic totality on the basis of solid and self-evident foundations. The search for foundation—a search that can never stop until it reaches the one and absolute Principle or Ground of all grounds—is an intrinsic moment of the striving for the great Synthesis, which is as wide as reality. That search itself is founded on the idea that thought and reality correspond adequately to each other and ultimately are identical.

| Time |

When classical ontology uses such terms as “principle,” “origin,” “end,” “a priori,” “precedence,” “before,” “first,” and so on, it mostly understands them in a nontemporal, “logical,” or “ontological” sense. As key concepts in the search for a well-constructed and complete world picture on the basis of a first and last foundation, they enable us to represent the universe as an orderly whole that can be comprehended here and now. Such a representation poses the universe, and the time “in” which it unfolds itself, as a present totality. The past and the future are presented as secondary forms of the present: remembrance and expectation bring them back or reduce them to the presence of a thought that ties all faces of temporality together in a supra-temporal, eternal “Now.” This Now, then, is immovable because it transcends all mobility by encompassing it within the limits of an imaginary superpresence.

Heidegger has pointed out that the distinction between time and being presupposed in traditional ontology is not at all clear and that we cannot separate the temporal dimension from being by a simple abstraction. Levinas, too, hears in the term quoted above a reference to temporality.

Presence and presencing characterize the time of the overall systems proposed in Western philosophy. Levinas’s analyses of the encounter and of ego’s subjectivity as summarized earlier showed, however, that we are not able to reduce the entire universe to one unique absolute origin, arche, or principle. If it is true that I, in relation to the Other, discover myself from the outset as already claimed and made hostage, then it is impossible to conceive of myself as the true beginning of my life and destiny. Before I can make any free choice or accept any obligation, I find myself as already dedicated and delivered over to
the Other. To be an ego is to have been performing—well or badly—the service that constitutes me as a subject. The meaning of existence has inscribed itself into my life long before I became aware that there was a question or an obligation. We cannot go back to the time where our subjectivity started to emerge: imagination and thought are not able to reach the beginning of "what it is all about."

The attempt to precede our "having-been-originated-before-we-discovered-it" by postulating an ultimate, that is, most primordial and absolutely transcendental Ego, is a consequence of the systematic project. It is refuted by the Other’s transcendence, to which a passivity in me corresponds. Although I neither contracted nor wanted anything—i.e., without my consent—I am obliged to serve the Other. Although I never committed a crime, I am always already in your debt and responsible as well for your as for my own failures and guilt. Not being able to choose my basic responsibilities and obligations—not even by a retrieval in the style of Plato’s remembrance—I am aware that the past from which I stem is more past than any past that can be recalled to memory: an immemorable past.

From the perspective of one’s temporality, the dimension of one’s future appears as threatened by death. Death is not—as Heidegger would have it—the ultimate possibility of human existence but rather an alien power that destroys every possibility of wanting or willing anything. Instead of being the “possibility of impossibility”—a form of “I can” that still suggests too much freedom—it is the utter impossibility of all possibilities. This impossibility receives, however, a positive meaning from the Other’s claims which dedicate me to an endless task whose performance costs me my life.

The future of a more just world, for which we cannot give up hoping, has also another time structure than that of a teleological projection. History cannot be reduced to a collective maturation and completion of humanity. Time cannot be understood as a continuous extension back and forth from the present because the multiplicity of events that surprise and overwhelm us cannot be assimilated as moments of an intelligible totality. Against a Hegelian or quasi-Hegelian interpretation of history, according to which all people, events, and works receive their meaning from their being necessary moments in the self-unfolding of an anonymous Principle, Levinas defends the humanism of another, invisible history—a history that respects the absolute-ness of every singular person in his or her here-and-now. The eschaton of this secret history is the just world of those who feed and clothe their others before they take care of their own possessions.
God

The keystone of all systems produced by Western philosophy has always been a being that simultaneously was origin, support, end, and horizon of the existing universe: as ground of all grounds, it existed because of its own essence; autarchic and self-sufficient, it did not need other beings but rather made them exist by granting them their being. Against Heidegger, we must strongly affirm that this Ultimate and First was not constantly represented as a highest being; all great metaphysicians have insistently argued that “God” can neither be compared to any being nor coincides with beingness. It is, however, true that the God of medieval and modern philosophy has been marked by the ontological and systematic concerns of Hellenistic philosophy.

The God of traditional philosophy is not the God of Levinas. The language we use with regard to God should be in agreement with our relation to the Other, who is the only “place” where God is revealed. Only from this perspective can one approach God respectfully. Not, however, as an enlargement of the human Other; for God is not another Autrui, but incomparably other. Of course, God is no thing and, least of all, an anonymous esse or “essence.” The strange ways by which this greatest of all enigmas touches us via the human Other is the reason why our attempts to talk about God are necessarily full of inadequacy, uncertainty, and guesswork, unable as we are to capture God by thetic or dogmatic discourse. By following certain suggestions, philosophical thinking can try metaphorically to evoke God as the One who has left a “trace” behind: I am invited to meet God by meeting the human Other who knocks at my door. This coincidence does not mean that Autrui is an incarnation or mask of God. Levinas does not say that the human Other is the presence or presentation of God, but rather that you are, and you face me “in the trace of God,” who already left the place where I meet with you. If I am “chosen” or “elected” to serve you before I am a choosing subject who can make decisions about my life, we may affirm that it is God who has inscribed itself into my life long before I became aware that there was a question or an obligation. Is he not the one who chose me before any engagement on my part and ordered me to welcome the unexpected visitor as guest? The immemorial past from which I stem suggests that the One who placed me on my way as one-for-the-Other has always already passed away, leaving me to my responsibility. Since God is essentially the One who has passed, “He” has never been present. If we get in touch with “Him,” it will be only his back that leaves us with an inkling. God has always already es-
caped, not only from every kind of phenomenological experience and description but also from all ways of evoking the human Other.

To indicate the incomprehensible character of the great enigma that is neither a being, nor a big or small Neuter, Levinas uses the neologism “illeity,” formed on the Latin or French form for “he” (ille, il). That responsibility for the Other and justice exist is due to “him,” but the unnamable can neither be present in our time nor be represented as a Presence in another, supernatural, or heavenly world outside this, our real one. As always already passed, God is an abyss, not a ground (archê), a foundation, a support, or a substance. God is “he” who left a trace in “anarchical” responsibility, i.e., a responsibility that does not have a beginning in our time. Responsibility, and not the fulfillment of total satisfaction, is the way in which the Good reveals itself on earth.

I Method

The difficulties of Levinas’s enterprise are great. The two main problems it must try to overcome seem to be the following. Rather than being two different problems, they are two sides of one central difficulty:

1. The revolution by which the constellation of the philosophical tradition undergoes a radical transformation or even a “destruction” can hardly avoid using at least some parts of the traditional terminology and conceptuality.\(^\text{49}\)

2. The unfolding of the new departure also needs the old perspectives, language, and logic because of their own relative truth, which should neither be abolished nor forgotten. They must, however, receive a new function and meaning from the new (and very old) perspective revealed by the Infinite. Thus, Levinas’s oeuvre develops—as does Heidegger’s oeuvre—by an ongoing critique and retrieval of the past, which must be remembered and transformed in order to understand the meaning of the new.

All the descriptions of the Other, the I, and the relation between the Other and me, all terms for unicity, singularity of the here-and-now, etc., are general terms one cannot protect against universalization. So, too, the attempt to replace the typical logic and language of ontology and phenomenology by another logic can never become a full success. All thematizing discourse converts itself, as soon as it has been uttered, into a “Said” that

\(^{49}\) Levinas himself found TI still too ontological, but thought that AE had broken the spell of the ontological language.
obeys the constraints of a constellation in which objectification, universalization, representation, consciousness, experience, phenomenality, givenness, and presence orient and—at least to a certain extent—dominate its thought. It is not possible to destroy that constellation completely; neither is it possible to eliminate a few of its elements. It is, however, possible—and this is what Levinas tries to do—to speak and to write in such a way that our Said itself eases our transcending it toward another invisible and incomprehensible dimension from the perspective of which the meaning of all the Said is revealed to be relative only. What we proffer about otherness, the self, the metaphysical relation, God, and time changes immediately in a moment of systematic patterns and structures, betraying, thus, the truth at which we aimed. This justifies a certain skepticism with regard to all philosophies. However, we can take the time to deny or “unsay” (dédire) what we just said (le dit)—a piece of ontology produced by our saying (le dire)—and be clearly aware that our denial, in its turn, will immediately change into a Said, which must be criticized again. If thinking means to do justice to “reality as it (really, truly) is,” it is an interminable work of self-correction, a diachronical saying, unsaying, saying again, leaving all syntheses behind in a succession of dictions and contradictions without end.