CHAPTER
FOUR
Text and Commentary

"Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite"

1. Autonomy and Heteronomy

Every philosophy seeks truth. Sciences, too, can be defined by this search, for from the philosophic *eros*,¹ alive or dormant in them, they derive their noble passion. If this definition seems too general and rather empty, it will, however, permit us to distinguish two directions the philosophical spirit takes, and this will clarify its physiognomy. These directions interact in the idea of truth.

1. Truth implies experience.² In the truth, a thinker maintains a relationship with a reality distinct from him, other than

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1 As Désir (desire), the Platonic notion of *eros* opens also *Totality and Infinity* (*TI* 3–5). The analysis there given is anticipated in section 5 of this article. However, Levinas's analysis of desire is also inspired by Plato's *Philebus* (50b ff.).

2 "Experience" or "genuine experience" is used here and also in *TI* (cf., for example, *TI* 20, 24, 22, 461.², 17019, 19429,21,34/509, 51, 23, 73, 23, 30, 19616, 21910,12) to indicate the nonidealistic, transcendent moment of all knowledge. Afterwards, however (cf. already *TI* xii33/25), "experience" is seen as belonging to the constellation of ontological words (such as "evidence," "phenomenon," "living presence," "consciousness," "be-
him—"absolutely other," according to the expression taken up again by Jankélévitch. For experience deserves its name only if it transports us beyond what constitutes our nature. Genuine experience must even lead us beyond the Nature that surrounds us, which is not jealous of the marvelous secrets it harbors, and, in complicity with men, submits to their reason and inventions; in it men also feel themselves to be at home. Truth would thus designate the outcome of a movement that leaves a world that is intimate and familiar, even if we have not yet explored it completely, and goes toward another region, toward a beyond, as Plato puts it. Truth would imply more than exteriority: transcendence. Philosophy would be concerned with the absolutely
other; it would be heteronomy itself. Let us go yet further. Distance alone does not suffice to distinguish transcendence from exteriority. Truth, the daughter of experience, has very lofty pretensions; it opens upon the very dimension of the ideal. In this way, philosophy means metaphysics, and metaphysics inquires about the divine.9

2. But truth also means the free adherence to a proposition, the outcome of a free research. The freedom of the investigator,

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8 “Heteronomy” summarizes here the following moments: (a) experience implies otherness; (b) otherness is not simple exteriority (which could be assimilated by the subject of experience); (c) transcendence, not sufficiently qualified by the metaphor of distance or farness.

9 The transcendent (a) is radically different; (b) it comes from “on high” (this “height” is expressed in the phrase “la vérité pretend très haut,” rendered as “has very lofty pretensions”); (c) it imposes a law; and (d) it is therefore “ideal.” The last determination is ambiguous. First, it points to Plato’s ideas, to which all phenomena point as the essence of their being and splendor as well as the ideal of this perfection; second, it points through them toward the source of the ideality of all ideas: (“the idea” of the Good, which is the giving source of all beingness and truth. As beyond the ideas, the Good itself is not an idea or essence but “beyond essence.” Plato calls it “divine” (theion). By Christian, Arab, and Jewish theologians “the Good” has been understood as a name or pseudonym of the God represented in the Bible and the Koran. In Totality and Infinity, Levinas prefers to call “the beyond” the infinite. The adjective “divine” is dangerous insofar as the transcendent—according to TT 4/34—is both the other human being and “the Most High.” “Metaphysics” as the passage of thinking from “Nature” and Being toward the Beyond is here opposed to “ontology” as a thought that remains within the horizon of Being (cf. also the end of section 2). This opposition is maintained in and after TT, but the word “metaphysics” is given up in later works.

10 Freedom is here understood as a being-at-home through a full possession of the world. Hegel’s “being-at-home-in-the-world” (zu Hause sein in der Welt) is a good concretization of this mastership. On the theoretical level, it takes the form of a knowledge in which all a posteriori elements are (re)produced by a complete deduction from a priori principles, and ultimately from one all-encompassing Principle, which includes the totality of beings as well as all knowledge and is their germinal and final unity. Truth, then, is the transparent integration and possession of the universe of beings by a conceptual insight that could have created them if it had not only their concepts but also the power to make them exist. Philosophy is then no longer research, journey, hospitality with regard to the surprises of experience but the restful possession of a safe property and enjoyment of the truth. The intimate coincidence of freedom and truth expressed in this sentence might be a hint at Heidegger’s meditation on their unity in his essay “On the Essence of Truth” (1943), but Levinas’s description of philosophical autonomy fits much better into Hegel’s explicit identification of freedom with reason and truth.
the thinker on whom no constraint weighs, is expressed in truth. What else is this freedom but the thinking being's refusal to be alienated in the adherence, the preserving of his nature, his identity, the feat of remaining the same despite the unknown lands into which thought seems to lead? Perceived in this way, philosophy would be engaged in reducing to the Same all that is opposed to it as other. It would be moving toward autonmy, a stage in which nothing irreducible would limit thought any longer, in which, consequently, thought, nonlimited, would be free. Philosophy would thus be tantamount to the conquest of being by man over the course of history.

Freedom, autonomy, the reduction of the Other to the Same, lead to this formula: the conquest of being by man over the course of history. This reduction does not represent some abstract

11 Although it recognizes to a certain extent that philosophy is a journey abroad or "from here to there" ("vers l'étranger"), on which one is surprised by strange and unsuspected events, the interpretation of philosophy as the conquest of autonomous knowledge sees it as an odyssey: by the integration of all his adventures, the traveler comes back to his point of departure. He has enriched himself but has not changed radically. The truth he found was already there from the outset. In opposition to Abraham, who went out to "unknown lands," Ulysses remained the same. By the interpretation of freedom as self-possession and (theoretical as well as practical) mastership over all beings, Levinas prepares his identification of "auto­nomy"—i.e., the being ruled by the law (nomos) of oneself (autos)—as realm of "the same" (tauton). As "preserving of" human "nature," this active self-identification will later on be equated with Spinoza's conatus essendi.

12 The set of concepts Same (tauton) and Other (to heteron) is taken from Plato's Sophist (254b–256b), where they figure as highest categories of being. Cf. also Timaeus 35ab and Theaetetus 185cd. In "La pensée de l’Être et la question de l’Autre," first published in 1978, Levinas refers to the circle of the Same encompassing the circle of the Other, as stated in the Timaeus (DDVI 176).

13 This is a clear allusion to the (neo-)Hegelian interpretation of history as the conquest of the universe by technical, economical, and political practice and above all by the theoretical understanding in the forms of art, religion, science, and philosophy. The limitations that presented themselves as obstacles to humankind's historical search for self-possession and self-knowledge are not abolished but integrated and thus no longer felt as obstacles. As limitations by which the spirit liberates itself from indeterminateness and thus concretizes itself in the form of a human world, they form the inner structure of its historical unfolding and actual existence.

14 The secret of Western philosophy (and of Western civilization as a whole) is not, as Heidegger thought, a fundamental stand with regard to the relation between Being and beings, but its nonrecognition of the
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schema; it is man's Ego. The existence of an Ego takes place as an identification of the diverse. So many events happen to it, so many years age it, and yet the Ego remains the Same! The Ego, the Self, the ipseity (as it is called in our time), does not remain invariable in the midst of change like a rock assailed by the waves (which is anything but invariable); the Ego remains the Same by making of disparate and diverse events a history—its history. And this is the original event of the identification of the Same, prior to the identity of a rock, and a condition of that identity.

Autonomy or heteronomy? The choice of Western philosophy has most often been on the side of freedom and the Same. Was not philosophy born, on Greek soil, to dethrone opinion, in which all tyrannies lurk and threaten? With opinion, the most subtle and treacherous poison seeps into the soul, altering it in its

radical difference of the Same (tauton) and the Other (to heteron), as expressed in its reduction of all heteronomy to absolute autonomy. Both Heidegger and Levinas, in their search for a renewal of "first philosophy," retrieve the central question of Plato's Sophist. Whereas Heidegger begins Sein und Zeit by quoting the gigantic fight about the sense of Being (to on), Levinas takes the categories of the Same and the Other, as pure in themselves but mixed with the other highest categories (being, movement, and rest), to be more "fundamental" than Being (cf. Sophist 254b–256b, especially 254e). The reduction of all otherness to the Same of Being, with which Parmenides started the Western history of philosophy, remained its leading thread, including Hegel's philosophy of history and even Heidegger's philosophy of Being if—as Levinas claims—this, too, must be understood as a gigantic "tautology."

Heidegger's renewal of Husserlian phenomenology has shown that human existence as such and in all its ways—like hammering, signifying, being anxious or angry, loving, enjoying, etc.—is an active practicing and understanding of the world and its phenomena. Levinas characterizes the way in which this praxis and understanding were performed and interpreted in Western civilization as an assimilation of all otherness to the all-embracing identity of an ego-centered universe. The active identification of beings by which the ego posits itself as world center constitutes its very selfhood.

The identity of the ego, for and by whom the universe of beings opens and unfolds itself as a panoramic world, is not a static substance surrounded by things and only accidentally touched by lived events but rather an active process by which its own being is changed as much as the world of things and events in which it is involved. The process of identification is the ego's (and humanity's) being a history; its having an identity—and possessing a world—is built up through this sort of history.

Cf. Plato's discussion, in book 10 of the Republic, of the affinities between a life governed by doxa (opinion) and the varieties of violence characteristic of tyranny, and Levinas's analyses of the opposition between freedom and violence in "Freedom and Command" (CPP 15–23).
depths, making of it an other. The soul “eaten up by others,” as Mr. Teste would say,\(^\text{18}\) does not feel its alteration, and is hence exposed to all violences. But this penetration and this prestige of opinion presuppose a mythical stage of being in which souls participate in one another, in the sense Lévy-Bruhl has given to the term.\(^\text{19}\) Against the turbid and disturbing participation of opinion presupposes, philosophy willed souls that are separate and in a sense impenetrable. The idea of the Same, the idea of freedom, seemed to offer the most firm guarantee of such a separation.\(^\text{20}\)

Thus Western thought very often seemed to exclude the transcendent, encompass every Other in the Same, and proclaim the philosophical birthright of autonomy.

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\(^\text{18}\) Monsieur Teste, Valéry’s retrieval of Descartes, spoke of another captivated soul when at the opera he whispered: “On n’est beau, on n’est extraordinaire que pour les autres! Ils sont mangés par les autres!” (Œuvres [Paris: Gallimard, 1960], 2:20: “One is beautiful and extraordinary only for the others! They are devoured by the others!”).

\(^\text{19}\) This is explained in Levinas’s article “Lévy-Bruhl et la philosophie contemporaine,” Revue Philosophique de la France et de l’Étranger 147 (1957): 556–69.

\(^\text{20}\) Attempts to overcome all kinds of intellectual slavery belong to the greatness of the Western tradition, as expressed from the outset by Parmenides and Plato. Opinion is still the most treacherous and effective weapon by which Machiavellian dictators deprive their subjects of their capacity to judge and will by themselves. The philosophical and scientific fight against opinion seems therefore to be a fight for emancipation, selfhood, liberty. By freeing us from a nonchosen and violently extracted agreement with tyrants, it seems to grant us independence. The lack of freedom caused by credulity and fought against by the Greek philosophers was the expression of the immersion in a world of myths and magic, in which “participation” is the rule. As his article “Lévy-Bruhl et Contemporaneous Philosophy” (see note 19) shows, and as he indicated already in De l’existence à l’existant (98–100), Levinas has been impressed by the similarities between the description of mythical cultures as cultures of monistic immersion and certain features of Western civilization. The emergence of Greek philosophy is here interpreted as an attempt to escape from a prephilosophical world of participation by conquering individual freedom and responsibility. Freedom is not possible unless the human individuals (“souls” or psychai) have become separated from the totality of which they were elements; by this separation, they are then also separated from one another. The way in which Greek (and Western) philosophy tried to emancipate individuals from mythical monism introduced, however, another form of monism: the philosophical reduction of all otherness to the Same of Being. The task of philosophy as pursued by Levinas is to find a way of thinking of individual separateness and responsibility without either justifying any form of slavery or falling back into mythical or “mythical participation.” This task coincides with the task of discovering a nonalienating sense of heteronomy.
2. Narcissism, or the Primacy of the Same

Autonomy, the philosophy which aims to ensure the freedom, or the identity of beings, presupposes that freedom itself is sure of its right, is justified without recourse to anything further, is complacent in itself, like Narcissus. When, in the philosophical life that realizes this freedom, there arises a term foreign to the philosophical life, other—the land that supports us and disappoints our efforts, the sky that elevates us and ignores us, the forces of nature that aid us and kill us, things that encumber us or serve us, men who love us and enslave us—it becomes an obstacle; it has to be surmounted and integrated into this life. But truth is just this victory and this integration. In evidence the violence of the encounter with the non-I is deadened. The commerce with exterior truth as enacted in true cognition is thus not opposed to freedom but coincides with it. The search for truth becomes the very respiration of a free being, exposed to exterior realities that shelter, but also threaten, its freedom. Thanks to truth, these realities, whose plaything I am in danger of becoming, are understood by me.

The "I think," thought in the first person, the soul conversing with itself or, qua reminiscence, rediscovering the teachings it receives, thus promote freedom. Freedom will triumph
when the soul's monologue will have reached universality, will have encompassed the totality of being, encompassing even the animal individual which lodged this thought. Every experience of the world, of the elements and objects, lends itself to this dialectic of the soul conversing with itself, enters into it, belongs to it. The things will be ideas, and will be conquered, dominated, possessed in the course of an economic and political history in which this thought will be unfolded. It is doubtless for this reason that Descartes will say that the soul might longer need a guide. Cf. Plato, *Theaetetus* 150a–151d; *Meno* 80d ff., *Phaedo* 72e ff.; *Phaedrus* 249bc.

Another model of thought is found in other traditions in which all thinking is seen as essentially supported by instruction. Here teachers cannot be replaced by the knowledge of their pupils. They remain unique, and their death cannot be compensated for. The only "compensation" for which they can hope is the emergence of other teachers—maybe their former pupils—in order to continue a traditional as well as absolutely new and unique instruction (enseignement). Cf. *TI* 70, 38, 62, 64–65/97, 67, 89, 92. Since Heidegger's philosophy is always at the background of Levinas's thought, it might be helpful, notwithstanding the enormous differences between Plato and Heidegger, to compare Plato's interpretation of philosophy as anamnesis with the summary of Heidegger's "method" given by T. Sheehan at the end of his excellent article "Heidegger's Topic: Excess, Recess, Access," *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie* 41 (1979): 615–35: "Therefore there is no method which could show us for the first time the topic of philosophy or lead us to the place of thought. For we are already there. The point is not to be led to the topic/topos but rather to remember what we already know and to become what we already are. In the words of the poet [T.S. Eliot],

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time."

Compare also this conception of space, place (topos), and traveling with what has been said above about the going "vers l'étranger" and the radical difference between Ulysses and Abraham.

24 By the phrase "jusqu'à l'individu animal qui logeait cette pensée," Levinas alludes to Aristotle's definition of the human being as an "animal" (or better, "a living being") "having logos" ("zooion logos" or "zooion logon echon") in *Politics* 1253a10 (cf. 1332b4) and *Nic. Ethics*, 1102a330 and 1139a5. Logos is interpreted here as the overwhelming ability to transform everything into an idea of the soul. With allusions to Hegelian dialectics, the following two phrases present the practical aspects of human existence as the unfolding of a more fundamental idealism at the roots of our civilization. Cf. *Transcendance et Hauteur*, 89, 91–93.
be the origin of the ideas that relate to exterior things, and thus account for the real.²⁵

The essence of truth will then not be in the heteronomous relationship with an unknown God, but in the already-known which has to be uncovered or freely invented in oneself, and in which everything unknown is comprised. It is fundamentally opposed to a God that reveals.²⁶ Philosophy is atheism, or rather unreligion, negation of a God that reveals himself and puts truths into us. This is Socrates’ teaching when he leaves to the master only the exercise of maieutics: every lesson introduced into the soul was already in it. The I’s identification, its marvelous autarchy,²⁷ is the natural crucible of this transmutation of the Other


²⁶ “The essence of truth” seems to be a translation of “das Wesen der Wahrheit” (Cf. Wegmarken, GA 9:177-202; Basic Writings, 113-41), by which Heidegger evokes the realm of interaction between the truth’s disclosing and withdrawing itself and the openness of Dasein. If Levinas aims here indeed at Heidegger’s conception of truth, he suggests that it is the direct continuation of Socrates’ teaching insofar as this sees thinking as the explanation of a prephilosophical familiarity with the ultimate horizon of Truth, within which eventually—at a later stage of the search—“the gods” or “the God” might appear as beings who owe their being to Truth of Being itself. Levinas’s suggestion that a certain “relationship of heteronomy with regard to an unknown God” (who might or might not reveal himself) would be more radical than the essence of truth as understood in Western philosophy can be taken seriously only if such a relationship does not presuppose the slavery of authoritarian opinions, i.e., if there are ways of being in touch with the transcendent that are neither opinions nor philosophical concepts. As excluding all transcendence (see the end of §1) and nonrecuperable instruction, the philosophy of absolute autonomy excludes all truth that cannot be reproduced by one’s own free thinking and, consequently, all revelation. It excludes a revealing God. Western philosophy is essentially atheistic (or polytheistic or pantheistic—all of which are ultimately the same if only a revealing God is (a) true God). The exclusion of all sorts of heteronomy implies a sharp separation not only between philosophy and faith but equally between ontology and theology. The “god” of the so-called “onto-theo-logy” is nothing more than a being among and above other beings and, thus, a mere idea within the horizon of the human soul. Levinas’s rejection of Western theology is, however, inspired by a motive very different from the average atheism of our time: traditional theology is too philosophical if “philosophy” is the name for the Western tradition; it is not philosophical enough if true philosophy is a thinking in the trace of radical transcendence.

²⁷ Besides the normal meaning of autarchy (“independent being in command”), this word alludes also to the fact that the ego for which philosophy must find a foundation or “principle” (archê), in the Western tradi-
into the Same. Every philosophy is—to use Husserl's neologisman egology. And when Descartes comes to discern an acquiescence of the will in even the most rational truth, he not only explains the possibility of error but sets up reason as an ego and truth as dependent on a movement that is free, and thus sovereign and justified.\textsuperscript{28}

This identification requires mediation. Whence a second characteristic of the philosophy of the same: its recourse to Neuters. To understand the non-I, access must be found through an entity, an abstract essence which is and is not. In it is dissolved the other's alterity. The foreign being, instead of maintaining itself in the impregnable fortress of its singularity, instead of facing, becomes a theme and an object. It fits under a concept already or dissolves into relations. It falls into the network of a priori ideas, which I bring to bear so as to capture it. To know is to surprise in the individual confronted, in this wounding stone, this upward plunging pine, this roaring lion, that by which it is not this very individual, this foreigner, that by which it is already betrayed and by which it gives the free will, vibrant in all certainty, hold over it, is grasped and conceived, enters into a concept. Cognition consists in grasping the individual, which alone exists, not in its singularity which does not count, but in its generality, of which alone there is science.\textsuperscript{29}

And here every power begins. The surrender of exterior things to human freedom through their generality does not

\textsuperscript{28} Cf. Descartes, Fourth Meditation, AT, 9:45 (translation Lafleur, 55) on the rule of the will in the affirmation of the truth.

\textsuperscript{29} The integration of all surprising and strange phenomena by the ego is a sort of alchemy in which various techniques are used to change them into ego's property. These techniques have in common that they make use of something intermediate to deprive the phenomena of that "element" which makes them precisely independent, real, and other. This "element" is their singularity. The intermediate has two main characteristics: it is neutral or—as it will be said below—anonymous; and it is universal. Aristotle is often quoted as an authority for the axiom that the singularity of beings cannot enter into the horizon of science and philosophy (\textit{de individuis non est scientia}, cf. Metaphysics
only mean, in all innocence, their comprehension, but also their being taken in hand, their domestication, their possession. Only in possession does the I complete the identification of the diverse. To possess is, to be sure, to maintain the reality of this other one possessed, but to do so while suspending its independence. In a civilization which the philosophy of the Same reflects, freedom is realized as a wealth. Reason, which reduces the other, is appropriation and power.

But if things do not resist the ruses of thought, and confirm the philosophy of the Same, without ever putting into question the freedom of the I, is this also true of men? Are they given to me as things are? Do they not put into question my freedom?

They can, to begin with, block it by opposing it with more than their force—their freedoms. They wage war. War is not a pure confrontation of forces; it can perhaps be defined as a relationship in which force does not alone enter into account, for

999a25-b25). As the attempt to integrate all (singular) beings (and their totality), thought prevents them from facing me by treating them as themes. It captures them in a network of universal concepts (categories, genera, or species, etc.). Making abstraction from that by which a being is "this-now-here," philosophy and science see it as a concrete universal, leaving the rest as something unimportant to the opinions and manipulations of everyday life. Universalization, the secret weapon of Western thought, thus turns out to be the source of all betrayals and overpowering of reality as it is. Autonomy without heteronomy and the universalism of an anonymous reason are the guiding principles of Western civilization, which is also the civilization of exploitation and imperialism. Western philosophy is inspired by a spirit that is also the spirit of appropriation and capitalistic colonization.

30 The mediating instance whereby the identification of knowledge was made possible was described as neutral and universal. Whereas universality is contrasted with singularity, neutrality is here the opposite of personality. This is a prelude to the second part of §2: after having reflected upon the possibility of reducing inanimate and nonhuman phenomena to instances of the ego's ideas, the following will concentrate on the question whether humans, too, can be reduced to mere elements of universal concepts or totalities. The difference between human and nonhuman beings was already hinted at when Levinas, some twenty-five lines earlier, wrote: "instead of facing, becomes a theme." The opposition between the face and a theme, central in T1, will be developed later on (especially in AE) into the difference between the Saying (le Dire) and the Said (le Dit). Whereas the Said can be treated as a theme or topic of an "objective" treatment, the Saying essentially resists all thematizing. "To put into question my freedom" is a summary of all Levinas's descriptions of the other's face or speech insofar as they resist and forbid the ruthless deployment of my autonomy into a monopolistic appropriation of the universe of beings.
the unforeseeable contingencies of freedom—skill, courage, and invention—count too. But in war the free will may fail without being put into question, without renouncing its rights and its revenge.\footnote{The social problem of Greek and modern social philosophy has always been how autonomous beings could peacefully unite in one community. The tensions caused by their confrontation result in war unless every singular freedom poses limits on its own egocentric self-satisfaction. As long as the principle of autonomy is maintained, its limitations or subjections by others or by the ego itself are justified in the name of freedom, and social philosophy remains faithful to the project of a universal egology. The ego's autonomy as such is not questioned and does not feel guilty of monopolizing as much as possible, on the condition that every ego has the right to be equally egocentric.}

Freedom is put into question by the Other, and is revealed to be unjustified, only when it knows itself to be unjust. Its knowing itself to be unjust is not something added on to spontaneous and free consciousness, which would be present to itself and know itself to be, \textit{in addition}, guilty. A new situation is created; consciousness's presence to itself acquires a different modality; its positions collapse.\footnote{The "principle" itself of social philosophy becomes another one—and this is the radical turn—when the consciousness of a free ego discovers the injustice of its monopoly confronting the existence of another (\textit{Autrui}). This discovery does not simply add an accidental surplus to an essentially innocent consciousness; it also reveals a certain duplicity in the heart of the subject: spontaneously inclined to a universal conquest, it is at the same time aware that, since there are others, the world and I belong (also) to them.}

To put it just in formal terms, the Same does not find again its priority over the other, it does not rest peaceably on itself, is no longer the principle. We shall endeavor to make these formulas more clear. And if the Same does not peaceably rest on itself, philosophy does not seem to be indissolubly bound up with the adventure that includes every Other in the Same.\footnote{The Same (which is simultaneously a formal category and the concrete self-realization of a monopolistic ego) is no longer the absolute coincidence with itself of the "egonomic" subject; its peaceful enjoyment has been disturbed by the claims of the Other (the formal \textit{Autre}, which is at the same time concrete \textit{Autrui}) and thus becomes aware of the guilt contained in its "egonomy." By this "turn," philosophy changes radically. If the Other is taken seriously, the inclusion of its circle within the circle of the Same, which according to Plato's \textit{Timaeus} (35ab) constitutes the ultimate horizon of the cosmos, is undone and the ultimate meaning of all things and humans has been changed.}

We shall return to this shortly; let us first observe that this supremacy of the Same over the Other seems to be integrally
maintained in the philosophy of Heidegger, the most renowned of our time.\textsuperscript{34} When Heidegger traces the way of access to each real singularity through Being, which is not a particular being nor a genus in which all the particulars would enter, but is rather the very act of being which the verb to be, and not the substantive, expresses (and which, with M. De Waelhens, we

\textsuperscript{34} The rest of §2 is a summary of Levinas's interpretation and criticism of Heidegger's philosophy. By applying the general characterization of Western philosophy, as given above, to Heidegger's ontology, Levinas wants to prove that—notwithstanding the depth and greatness of its renewal—it remains faithful to the traditional inspiration. This first extensive statement of Levinas's criticism is contained in his important article "L'ontologie est-elle fondamentale?" \textit{Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale} 56 (1951): 88–98; its development from 1929 until 1951 has been outlined in my "Phenomenology—Ontology—Metaphysics: Levinas' Perspective on Husserl and Heidegger," \textit{Man and World} 16 (1983): 113–27.

The argumentation given here can be summed up by the following points: "Being" as Heidegger, according to Levinas, understands it, must be heard as a verb and not as a substantive. It is the active (and—as Levinas says elsewhere—"transitive") deployment and bringing into the open to which all beings owe their being and appearing (cf., for example, Levinas's remarks in Jean Wahl, \textit{Esquisse pour une histoire de l'existentialisme} [Paris: L'Arche, 1949], 95–96). As such, it is "the very act of being" (l'\textit{acte même d'être}); the later Heidegger would call this, rather, "Seiendheit," but Levinas does not distinguish this here clearly from the \textit{Wesen}, \textit{Walten}, and \textit{Gewähren} of Heidegger's "Being itself" (\textit{das Sein selbst}). Singular beings (or phenomena) are known thanks to the light and under the rule of Being. In this structure, as thematized by Heidegger's analysis of \textit{Dasein}'s understanding, we recognize the structure of the traditional mediation: the knowledge of the singularity of existing beings is due to the intelligibility granted to them by a neuter that has also the character of a universal. A more concrete form of this ruling and enlightenment is found in Heidegger's elucidation of the relation between a human being and its freedom. If freedom as essence of \textit{Dasein} possesses the singular humans, it is again a neuter that commands the singular beings that owe their most proper being to it.

Although Heidegger's thought has deeply changed the traditional meaning of human independence, autarchy, and autonomy, as can be illustrated by a comparison of \textit{Sein und Zeit} with Plato's view on the profound affinity of the soul with the ideas (cf. \textit{Phaedo} 76de, 100b), the same fundamental structure shows itself in Heidegger's analysis of \textit{Dasein} as a finite variety of possibilities on the basis of an ultimate possibility: the possibility of its impossibility by death, which can and must be accepted beforehand by resolve. This mortal and finite being constitutes itself as a concentrated, solitary identity, and its sameness is in the end not challenged by any genuine otherness. Cf. \textit{SuZ}, §§52–53 and Levinas's commentary in \textit{EDHH} 85–87.
write with a capital "B"), he leads us to the singularity across
a Neuter which illuminates and commands thought and renders
intelligible. When he sees man possessed by freedom rather than
possessing freedom, he puts over man a Neuter which illuminates
freedom without putting it in question. And thus he is not de-
stroying but summing up a whole current of Western philosophy.

The principle of a nonheteronomous autonomy is not betrayed by
Heidegger's submitting human freedom to Being—classical idealism de-

The clair-obscur of Heidegger's Aêtheia, its mysteriousness, is a
special mode of its belonging to Dasein as the neutral horizon within
which Dasein "always already" is at home. (Cf. Heidegger, "Vom Wesen
der Wahrheit" and "Brief über den Humanismus," especially GA 9:
187–93; "On the Essence of Truth" and "Letter on Humanism" in Basic
Writings, 113–41, 189–242.) Being and its understanding by an illumina-
ted subject form a union without separation. In bringing noein and
einai together, the neutrality of Being confirms the central position of
a quiet subject.

That Being is not different enough to be truly other shows itself most
clearly in the fact that Dasein, according to Heidegger's description of
mortality and conscience (Gewissen), experiences its finitude as pure defi-
cency but not as an imperfection or as guilt (cf. SuZ, §§58–60). Heidegger
departs from the classical thesis that the finiteness of beings cannot be
known unless in contrast with the prior notion of the infinite. (Through
a note—note 1 of the original publication and of EDHH 170—Levinas refers
the reader to his commentary on Heidegger's analysis of Dasein's finitude
in EDHH 102, whereas—further on, in §3—Levinas himself will retrieve
Descartes's version of that classical insight.) The experience of the contrast
between the finite and the infinite, as revealed in the face of another, is
not simply the discovery of a privation but the awakening to one's own
profound indebtedness and bad conscience. The infinite reveals itself as
the Good (cf. Plato, Republic 50de, 509b, 577b, 518d), in the "light" of
which the position of a monopolistic ego "appears" as the usurpation of
a tyrannical, "hard," and "cruel" will. (Cf. also the texts already cited:
"De la déficience sans souci au sens nouveau," Concilium (1976), n. 113;
and "La mauvaise conscience et l'inexorable," DDVI 258–65). If the assur-
ance of egocentrism can only be troubled by real otherness, i.e., by the
immediate encounter with another being, the relationship of Dasein with
neutral Being cannot unsettle its good conscience. Since the relationship
with the Other in Heidegger's analyses—insofar as they do not simply
ignore it—is subordinated to the former relation, which is considered more
important, Dasein remains free to understand and will itself as the absolute
center of its world. Behind its understanding of Being and its own relation
to Being lurks the self-affirmation of a will to power capable of all violence
and cruelties in order to maintain its domination.
The *Dasein* Heidegger puts in place of the soul, consciousness, or the Ego retains the structure of the Same. Independence—autarchy—came to the Platonic soul (and to all its counterfeit versions) from its homeland, the world of Ideas; according to the *Phaedo*, the soul is related to that world and consequently cannot encounter anything really foreign in it. Reason, the power to maintain oneself identical above the variations of becoming, formed the soul of this soul. Heidegger contests this dominant position for man, but leaves *Dasein* in the Same, qua mortal. The possibility of being annihilated is in fact constitutive of *Dasein*, and thus maintains its ipseity. This nothingness is a death, is my death, my possibility (or impossibility), my power. No one can substitute himself for me to die. The supreme moment of resoluteness is solitary and personal.

To be sure, for Heidegger man's freedom depends on the light of Being, and thus does not seem to be a principle. But that was also the case in classical idealism, where free will was considered the lowest form of freedom, and true freedom obeyed universal reason. The Heideggerian freedom is obedient, but obedience makes it arise and does not put it into question, does not reveal its injustice. Being, equivalent to the independence and extraneousness of realities, is equivalent to phosphorescence, light. It converts into intelligibility. The "mystery" essential to this "dark light" is a modality of this conversion. Independence ends in radiation. *Being and Time*, Heidegger's first and principal work, perhaps always maintained but one thesis: Being is inseparable from the comprehension of Being; Being already invokes subjectivity. But Being is not a being. It is a Neuter which orders thought and beings, but which hardens the will instead of making it ashamed. The consciousness of his finitude does not come to man from the idea of infinity, that is, is not revealed as an imperfection, does not refer to the Good, does not know itself to be wicked. Heideggerian philosophy precisely marks the apogee of a thought in which the finite does not refer to the infinite (prolonging certain tendencies of Kantian philosophy: the separation between the understanding and reason, diverse themes of transcendental dialectics), in which every deficiency is but weakness and every fault committed

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35 The expression "*obscure clarté,*" taken from Corneille's *Le Cid* (4.3), characterizes here the ambiguity of Heidegger's *Alètheia*, which—as *Geheimnis*—withdraws itself while suggesting itself in enlightening beings.

36 Cf. below section 3 [Levinas's note].
against oneself—the outcome of a long tradition of pride, heroism, domination, and cruelty.

Heideggerian ontology subordinates the relation with the other to the relation with the Neuter, Being, and it thus continues to exalt the will to power, whose legitimacy the Other (Autrui) alone can unsettle, troubling good conscience. When Heidegger calls attention to the forgetting of Being, veiled by the diverse realities it illuminates, a forgetting for which the philosophy developed from Socrates on would be guilty, when he deplores the orientation of the intellect toward technology, he maintains a regime of power more inhuman than mechanism and which perhaps does not have the same source as it.37 (It is not sure that National Socialism arises from the mechanist reification of men, and that it does not rest on peasant enrooted-

37 The argumentation has reached the point where Levinas—in agreement with Heidegger’s own remark on the ontic and existentiell source of any existential analysis (cf. Sein und Zeit) undertakes to interpret Heidegger’s philosophical position as the theoretical expression of a specific way of existence. Whereas Heidegger interprets the radical crisis of Western thought as a forgetting of Being due to its replacement by the totality of beings and sees the adoration of technology as the expression of a reduction of beingness to its objective or vorhanden mode of being (cf. SuZ, §§1, 6, 68 etc.), Levinas sees this diagnosis and the orientation of Heidegger’s own thought as expressions of a peculiar mode of human existence that—far from being true—sins above all by its lack of ethical concern. Alluding to many different essays of the later Heidegger, such as "Die Frage nach der Technik" ("The Question Concerning Technology"), "Die Ursprung des Kunstwerkes" ("The Origin of the Work of Art") and "Bauen—Wohnen—Denken" ("Building—Dwelling—Thinking"), Levinas draws the portrait of a spontaneous and thus "natural" existence rooted in a natal soil ("Blut und Boden!") resistant to any derangement by strangers and not disposed to any exodus, the existence of a peasantry attached to its familiar spaces and places (allusion to Heidegger’s later topology of "Ort" and "Er-örterung") and to the fixed hierarchy of its masters and servants. The realm of anonymous Being, to which this existence owes its capacity of cultivating, building, and dwelling, also rules thinking. Its secret is the self-assured maintenance of an amoral heroism ready for all sorts of war and exploitation in the name of drama and power. Thus Heidegger’s brilliant descriptions of the world would reveal and hide the same pagan existence of nonethical enrootedness as that which lies at the basis of National Socialism. Similar characterizations of Heidegger’s perspective are given in less technical essays, such as "Heidegger, Gagarine et nous" and "Le lieu et l’utopie" ("Site and Utopia") in Difficile Liberté, 229–303. Cf. also one of the epigraphs of AE taken from Pascal: “‘That is my place in the sun.’ That is how the usurpation of the whole world began” (Pensées, Edition Brunschvicg, n. 112).
ness and a feudal adoration of subjugated men for the masters and lords who command them). 38 This is an existence which takes itself to be natural, for whom its place in the sun, its ground, its site, orient all signification—a pagan existing. Being directs it building and cultivating, in the midst of a familiar landscape, on a maternal earth. Anonymous, neuter, it directs it, ethically indifferent, as a heroic freedom, foreign to all guilt with regard to the Other.

Indeed this earth-maternity determines the whole Western civilization of property, exploitation, political tyranny, and war. Heidegger does not discuss the pretechnological power of possession effected in the enrootedness of perception (which no one has described so brilliantly as he), in which the most abstract geometrical space is in the last analysis embedded, but which cannot find any place in the whole infinity of mathematical extension. The Heideggerian analyses of the world which in *Being and Time* were based on gear or fabricated things are in his later philosophy borne by the vision of the lofty landscapes of nature, an impersonal fecundity, matrix of particular beings, inexhaustible matter of things.

Heidegger not only sums up a whole evolution of Western philosophy. He exalts it by showing in the most dramatic way its anti-religious essence become a religion in reverse. 39 The lucid sobriety of those who call themselves friends of truth and enemies of opinion would thus have a mysterious prolongation! In Heidegger atheism is a paganism, the pre-Socratic text anti-Scriptures. Heidegger shows in what intoxication the lucid sobriety of philosophers is steeped. 40

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38 Probably Levinas alludes here to Heidegger’s reference to Nazism with the words “the inner truth and greatness of this movement (namely the encounter of the planetarily determined technology and modern man)”; cf. *Einführung in die Metaphysik* (1952), 152 (Introduction to *Metaphysics*, 199). Whereas Heidegger’s diagnosis of the technological civilization traces its blindness to truth back to the identification of being as Vorhandenes, an ethically less indifferent perspective would show more positive and, especially, important moral features of modern technology.

39 The last step in the argumentation runs parallel with the general characteristic of ontology as described in the beginning of §2: Heidegger’s thought of Being is at the same time atheistic (because God cannot enter into the horizon of his ontology) and a dramatic (pathétique) form of “religious” paganism full of reverence for sacred sites and gods.

40 The lucid sobriety stressed by Plato as a condition for a thought that is true to being (Republic 501d2, 536a5, 537d8 and Symposium 218e7) seems to have returned to the mysteries of opinions from which (cf. §1) the philosophers (as “friends of the truth”) had delivered thinking. Is this new enthusiasm (literally, “being filled by the divine”) the
To conclude, the well-known theses of Heideggerian philosophy—the preeminence of Being over beings, of ontology over metaphysics—end up affirming a tradition in which the Same dominates the Other, in which freedom, even the freedom that is identical with reason, precedes justice. Does not justice consist in putting the obligation with regard to the Other before obligations to oneself, in putting the Other before the Same?41

3. The Idea of the Infinite

By reversing the terms42 we believe we are following a tradition at least as ancient,43 that which does not read right in might and does true *mania* that Plato’s *Phaedrus* (224a–d) sees as identical with that lucidity? Behind the Plato-Heidegger opposition evoked here, another opposition can be heard: that between the biblical prophets and the cult of the Baals (i.e., of Nature, a fecundity and violence), another celebration of “blood and soil.”

41 Levinas summarizes the result of his discussion by formulating it twice: in a (more) metaphysical, and in a (more) ethical statement. On the level of “metaphysics,” he rejects Heidegger’s subordination of beings to Being by announcing his own thesis that the true beginning of philosophy lies in the recognition of the relation between the Same and the Other, in which the Other comes before the Same; on the level of fundamental *ethics*, which is as radical as—but not a replacement of—metaphysics, he states as the first “axiom” that justice (the relation to the Other) precedes freedom (the relation of self-possession in the Same). It is, thus, not Levinas’s purpose to reverse the traditional hierarchy of philosophical disciplines, in which the first and fundamental place is occupied by metaphysics or ontology, by putting a fundamental ethics in their place. His concern is to show how the most radical and truly “first” “principle” is not a traditional *archè* but rather a relation that precedes the distinction between the theoretical and the ethical. “Metaphysics,” unlike ontology, is at the same time a theoretical and practical philosophy.

42 The entrance to Levinas’s metaphysics demands a “turn” of eyes, heart, and intelligence that is more radical than Heidegger’s *Kehre* and at least as radical as Plato’s *epistrophe* from opinion to the truth of the Good, but it is not the simple reversal of the traditional scheme. Instead of abolishing the inclusion of the Other in the Same by enclosing the Same in the Other, Levinas replaces their union by the unbreakable relation between them as separate and connected terms.

43 The prophetic tradition to which Levinas appeals is “at least as ancient” as the pre-Socratic philosophers. It is quoted not as an authoritarian doxa or conviction but as an expression of genuine “experiences” having at least as much of a right to exist within philosophy as the evocations and descriptions of Parmenides, Heraclitus, Hölderlin, or Rilke. Resonances of the tradition to which Levinas appeals here are found in other ancient traditions, such as those of Hesiod and Plato.
not reduce every other to the same. Against the Heideggerians and neo-Hegelians for whom philosophy begins with atheism, we have to say that the tradition of the Other is not necessarily religious, that it is philosophical. Plato stands in this tradition when he situates the Good above Being, and, in the *Phaedrus*, defines true discourse as a discourse with gods. But what we find most distinctive is the Cartesian analysis of the idea of the infinite, although we shall retain only the formal design of the structure it outlines.

In Descartes the I that thinks maintains a relationship with the Infinite. This relationship is not that which connects a container to a content, since the I cannot contain the Infinite.

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44 In opposition to the tradition described in section 2, the other tradition does not base itself on the will to power, but it confronts the exuberance of ego's spontaneity with the other's rights. Levinas does not claim here that all other beings (tout autre, "every other") resist assimilation, but he insists on the irreducibility of any other human being.

45 Against the general trend of contemporary thought (in which Hegel and Heidegger have become closer to each other than each of them would be willing to concede) but with the whole tradition from "Moses" and Plato to Hegel (and Nietzsche?), Levinas claims that the "transcendent," the "metaphysical," the "infinite," the "beyond of being," the "Other," and "God" belong essentially to the core concepts of philosophical thought.

46 Plato defined philosophy not only as "conversation of the soul with itself" (see note 23), but also as a "talk with gods" (*Phaedrus* 273e–274a). For the (idea of the) Good above Being, see *Republic* 517b and 518d and innumerable quotations by Levinas, e.g., *TI* 76/102–3 and *EDHH* 189.

47 Not only here but as a fundamental device of his method, Levinas distinguishes between a formal structure and its concrete existence. Cf., for example, *TI* 21/50, and the way in which the beginning of *TI* analyzes the relation of the Same and the Other as a relation between abstract ("logical") categories, which relation only afterwards is concretized as a human face-to-face encounter and conversation (*TI* 9, 18, 21/39, 47, 50–51).

48 Presupposing that we can separate the formal structure of Descartes's "idea of the Infinite" from its more concrete content, which is the connection between consciousness and God, Levinas recognizes the basic structure of the relation he is looking for in that "idea." "The idea of the Infinite" is, thus, not a representation, a concept, or a normal idea but rather the primordial relation relating the self-sameness of the ego to the irreducibility of the Other. All the allusions here are to the third of Descartes's *Metaphysical Meditations on First Philosophy* (AT, 9:29–42; English translation by Lafleur, especially 43–46, 49). In it Descartes argues for the thesis (1) that the idea of an infinite, eternal, unchangeable and independent, all-knowing, almighty, and all-creating substance is an originary idea found in ego's consciousness; (2) that this idea cannot be obtained by any elaboration (simple or double negation, extension, intensification, or
nor that which binds a content to a container, since the I is separated from the Infinite. The relationship which is thus described negatively is the idea of the Infinite in us.

We have of course also ideas of things; the idea of infinity is exceptional in that its ideatum surpasses its idea. In it the distance between idea and ideatum is not equivalent to the distance that separates a mental act from its object in other representations. The abyss that separates a mental act from its object is not deep enough for Descartes not to say that the soul can account for the ideas of finite things by itself.\footnote{Descartes, \textit{Meditations}, AT, 9:35.} The intentionality that animates the idea of the Infinite is not comparable with any other; it aims at what it cannot embrace and is in this sense the Infinite. To take the converse of the formulas we used above, we can say that the alterity of the infinite is not canceled, is not extinguished in the thought that thinks it. In thinking the infinite, the I from the first \textit{thinks more than it thinks}. The Infinite does not enter into the idea of the infinite, is not grasped; this idea is not a concept. The infinite is the radically, absolutely, other. The transcendence of the infinite with respect to the ego that is separated from it and thinks it constitutes the first mark of its infinitude.

The idea of the infinite is then not \([?]\) the only one that teaches what we are ignorant of.\footnote{In the first version of the essay (in the \textit{Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale} of 1957), the sentence reads: "The idea of the infinite is then the only one . . ." ("L'idée de l'infini est donc la seule qui apprenne ce qu'on ignore," 247). For the second edition of \textit{EDHH} 172, Levinas added a "not" (\textit{n'est donc pas}), but this does not seem to give a good meaning because the argument stresses our incapability of knowing what, how, or who the infinite is. Since the infinite is not an object or}
the term: a relationship with the exterior, with the Other, without this exteriority being able to be integrated into the Same. The thinker who has the idea of the infinite is *more than himself*, and this inflation, this surplus, does not come from within, as in the celebrated *project* of modern philosophers, in which the subject surpasses himself by creating.\(^{51}\)

How can such a structure be still philosophical? What is the relationship which, while remaining one of *the more in the less*, is not transformed into the relationship in which, according to the mystics, the butterfly drawn by the fire is consumed in the fire? How can separate beings be maintained and not sink into participation, against which the philosophy of the Same will have the immortal merit to have protested?\(^{52}\)

4. The Idea of the Infinite and the Face of the Other (*Autrui*)

Experience, the idea of the infinite, occurs in the relationship with the Other (*Autrui*). The idea of the infinite is the social relationship.\(^{53}\)

theme, we are and remain ignorant in our relation to it. *This* ignorance does not, however, extend itself to other beings. In the preceding paragraph Levinas alluded even to the passage where Descartes asks himself why it would not be possible to "account for" (*rendre compte*) the ideas of all finite beings by deducing them a priori. The first version of the sentence (without "not") seems therefore to be the correct one, but it must be read as an interpretation of Descartes's discourse. If it were taken as an expression of Levinas's own thought, it would seem to state that all knowledge of the finite is reminiscence, *anamnesis*, ontological, and a priori, as if there were no otherness at all involved in it. By adding his "not," Levinas probably wanted to restate the thesis with which he began his article: *all* true experience somehow is a learning experience made possible by the otherness of an instructive surprise.


\(^{52}\) Cf. above Levinas's praise for the Greek dethronement of the tyranny exercised by *doxai*, myths, and participation. Expressions such as "*the more in the less*" (*le plus dans le moins*), "surplus," and "to think more than one thinks" are, of course, metaphors only to indicate the nonquantitative, nonqualitative, and even "*nonbeing*" separation-in-connection of the one (who is the same) and the other. This relation is, then, absolutely different from the traditional relation.

\(^{53}\) In this section, Levinas analyzes the concrete form (mode of "being" and "appearing") of the abstract structure sketched in the former sections. The structure of experience has revealed itself to be a relation
This relationship consists in approaching an absolutely exterior being. The infinity of this being, which one can therefore not contain, guarantees and constitutes this exteriority. It is not equivalent to the distance between a subject and an object. An object, we know, is integrated into the identity of the Same; the I makes of it its theme, and then its property, its booty, its prey, or its victim. The exteriority of the infinite being is manifested in the absolute resistance which by its apparition, its epiphany, it opposes to all my powers. Its epiphany is not simply the apparition of a form in the light, sensible or intelligible, but already this no cast to powers; its logos is: "You shall not kill."\(^{54}\)

To be sure, the Other (*autrui*) is exposed to all my powers, succumbs to all my ruses, all my crimes. Or he resists me with all his force and all the unpredictable resources of his own freedom. I measure myself against him. But he can also—and here is where

to the other/the infinite. This relation "is" (concretizes itself in, is concrete as) the relation to another (*autrui*). This relation of immediate intersubjectivity (of you and me) is called here "social relationship" (*rapport social*), to be distinguished clearly from the relation you and I have as members and participants of one society. At this point, we may ask whether "infinity" or "the infinite" is the best translation of Levinas's (*l'infini*), which he sometimes also writes with a capital (e.g., in the title of section 3, but not in that of the present section 4). If we presuppose the possibility of separating a completely abstract structure from its concretization in Descartes's *Dieu* or Levinas's *autrui*, we might be inclined to prefer "infinity" because of its categorial overtones, whereas "the infinite" might suggest too quickly that we are talking about a divine and highest being. We must, then, however explain why Levinas himself does not transform Descartes's "infini" into the perfectly correct French expression "infinitude." The disadvantage of the term "infinity," however, is that it seems to suggest the possibility of categorizing from a transcendental perspective through logical determinations God as well as other humans with whom we meet. If we can understand "the infinite" as the pure equivalent of "the other" (and "infinity" as the equivalent of "alterity" or "otherness"), the proper translation of "(l'infini)" seems to be "the infinite." The question, however, becomes more complicated when, in other texts, Levinas will state more clearly that the existence of the human other, because of his/her absolute otherness (or infinity), is the only possible revelation of God.

\(^{54}\) This most exterior and infinite "being" is not a phenomenon like other phenomena but an "epiphany" or "revelation" (words very often used in *TT*). Its logos ("principle" or "definition") is not—as the whole tradition from Parmenides to Heidegger would defend—an essence that can be confined within the *horismos* of its horizons but a coming to the fore that simultaneously is an imperative. The first law of ethics is also the first law of human thought and language.
he presents me his face—oppose himself to me beyond all measure, with the total uncoveredness and nakedness of his defenseless eyes, the straightforwardness,\(^55\) the absolute frankness of his gaze. The solipsist disquietude of consciousness, seeing itself, in all its adventures, a captive of itself, comes to an end here: true exteriority is in this gaze which forbids me my conquest. Not that conquest is beyond my too weak powers, but I am no longer able to have power:\(^56\) the structure of my freedom is, we shall see further, completely reversed. Here is established a relationship not with a very great resistance but with the absolute Other, with the resistance of what has no resistance, with ethical resistance. It opens the very dimension of the infinite, of what puts a stop to the irresistible imperialism of the Same and the I. We call a face the epiphany of what can thus present itself directly, and therefore also exteriorly, to an I.

A face is not like a plastic form, which is always already deserted, betrayed, by the being it reveals, such as marble from which the gods it manifests already absent themselves.\(^57\) It differs from an animal’s head, in which a being, in its brutish dumbness, is not yet in touch with itself. In a face the expressed attends its expression, expresses its very expression, always remains master of the meaning it delivers. A “pure act” in its own way,\(^58\) it

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\(^{55}\) The word “droiture,” which is rendered here by “straightforwardness,” contrasts with the mediation analyzed in section 2 and marks the difference between the dimension of egos as free forces confronting one another and the dimension of moral obligation and vulnerability.

\(^{56}\) “Je ne peux plus pouvoir” is a reversal of the conception that the human being ought to be defined as a primordial possibility (capacity or power) of self-realization. Levinas sees this conception expressed in Heidegger’s determination of Dasein as a Seinkönnen (a being possible) in Sein und Zeit (§31). See also GA, 20:421, where the equivalence of Ich bin (Dasein) and Ich kann (Möglichkeit) is stated. The formula “Ich kann” is found already in Husserl’s Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie, 2:257ff.

\(^{57}\) If we observe a face in order to check its proportions, color, or shades, we see a phenomenon comparable to other phenomena but will not see the face as facing us; it will not reveal its otherness. The “plastic form” is the “aesthetic” dimension of a visage, not the epiphany of its unobservable and “invisible” enigma. See “Enigma and Phenomenon” in EDHH 203–16/CPP 61–74.

\(^{58}\) “Pure act” (actus purus) is the Aristotelizing scholastic expression used to characterize God as perfect being without any admixture of passivity (cf. Aristotle, Metaphysics 1071b–1073a). Just like the word “master” in the preceding sentence, the word “act” tries to describe the
resists identification, does not enter into the already known, brings aid to itself, as Plato puts it, speaks. The epiphany of a face is wholly language.60

Ethical resistance is the presence of the infinite. If the resistance to murder, inscribed on a face, were not ethical, but real, we would have access to a reality that is very weak or very strong. It perhaps would block our will. The will would be judged unreasonable and arbitrary.61 But we would not have access to an exterior being, to what one absolutely can neither take in nor possess, where our freedom renounces its imperialism proper to the ego, where it is found to be not only arbitrary, but unjust. But then the other is not simply another freedom; to give me knowledge of injustice, his gaze must come to me from a dimension of the ideal.62 The

“imposing” aspect of the face by which it cannot be submitted to the dimension of the oppositions between activity and passivity or mastery and slavery. The imperative voiced by the Other’s irruption does not condemn me to slavery at all but makes me free and open for authentic transcendence.

59 Here, and already in the phrase “the expressed attends its expression” (“l’expressé assiste à l’expression”), Levinas alludes to an expression repeatedly used in Plato’s Phaedrus (247b–277a) to show the preeminence of the spoken word over writing. The speaker “assists” and supports the words he/she speaks.

60 “Language” must be understood here as speaking as such, which does not coincide with its content. Just as facing differs from the “plastic form,” so speaking (“language”) differs from the spoken. After TI, Levinas concentrates much more on this difference between “the Saying” (le Dire) and “the Said” (le Dit) than on the analysis of the Face.

61 The “presence” or concrete existence of “the infinite” is the facing as powerless, naked, mortal, and vulnerable resistance to my spontaneous wish to appropriate and overpower whatever comes in my way. The two dimensions are here opposed as “ethical” (cf. Plato’s “truly being,” which cannot be isolated from the “idea” of the Good) and “real” (the ontological reality of the physis in which autonomous and ruthless forces decide the outcome of all oppositions).

62 The Other (Autrui) is the concrete presence of the features with which the first page of this essay characterized the heteronomous aspect of all experience: another looking at me (son regard) signifies the ideal and the divine. This signification is not only found in sacred books; if it is also found there, the reason is that they, too, formulate an authentic “experience,” the repression of which results in a guilty conscience. The awakening to a moral life coincides with the discovery that the other is the first to be respected, served, taken care of by me. It is the discovery of my responsibility for the other, a responsibility that is greater than my concern for myself. This is expressed by the final sentence of this section: “La justice bien ordonnée commence par Autrui,” in which the “metaphysical turn” is summarized by a reversal of the French dictum:
Other (*Autrui*) must be closer to God than I. This is certainly not a philosopher's invention, but the first given of moral consciousness, which could be defined as the consciousness of the privilege the Other has relative to me. Justice well ordered begins with the Other.

5. The Idea of the Infinite Is Desire

The ethical relationship is not grafted on to an antecedent relationship of cognition, it is a foundation and not a superstructure. To distinguish it from cognition is not to reduce it to a subjective sentiment. The idea of the infinite, in which being overflows the idea, in which the Other overflows the Same, breaks with the inward play of the soul and alone deserves the name experience, a relationship with the exterior. It is then more *cognitive* than cognition itself, and all objectivity must participate in it.

Malebranche's vision in God (cf. the Second *Metaphysical Discourse*) expresses both this reference of all cognition to the idea of the infinite and the fact that the idea of the infinite is not like the cognition that refers to it. For one cannot maintain

"charité bien ordonnée commence par soi-même" ("Charity well ordered begins with oneself"). The reason why "charity" is replaced by justice is not that Levinas wants to diminish the extension and the intensity of the dedication I owe to any other. On the contrary, the term "charity" is so much used and abused to express the infinity of the demands imposed on me by a face that the word "justice" might be a better name for the imperative that is as old as the "Law of Moses." Later on, Levinas will also use expressions such as *amour du prochain* (love of the nearest) and *proximité* (proximity). In order to evoke the basic experience, Levinas often quotes a line from Dostoyevski's *Brothers Karamazov*: "All of us are guilty of everything and responsible for everyone in the face of everything and I more than the others" (cf., for instance *EL* 105).

63 "Cognition" (*connaissance*) is taken here in its theoretical and traditional sense, which includes identifying freedom as described in section 2. The "ethical relationship" is *not* its contrary but a more radical relation preceding the scission of contemplation and action. This relation is therefore wiser and more "knowledgeable" than (the traditional sort of) cognition. Implicitly Levinas rejects here the conception of the early Husserl, who thought that all noncognitive intentions were based on *doxic* intentions. Moral intentions are not secondary but rather the unfolding of the most basic of all "intentions": the relation of transcendence itself, which is as much ethical as—in a more fundamental and "experimental" sense—cognitive.
that this idea itself is a thematization or an objectification without reducing it to the presence of the Other in the Same, a presence with which it in fact contrasts. In Descartes, a certain ambiguity concerning this point remains, since the cogito which rests on God elsewhere founds the existence of God: the priority of the Infinite is subordinated to the free adhesion of the will, which initially is master of itself.

We separate ourselves from the letter of Cartesianism in affirming that the movement of the soul that is more cognitive than cognition could have a structure different from contemplation. The infinite is not the object of a contemplation, that is, is not proportionate to the thought that thinks it. The idea of the infinite is a thought which at every moment thinks more than it thinks. A thought that thinks more than it thinks is Desire. Desire "measures" the infinity of the infinite.

The term we have chosen to mark the propulsion, the inflation, of this going beyond is opposed to the affectivity of love and

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64 In his Conversations on Metaphysics and Religion (Entretiens sur la Métaphysique et sur la Religion, Œuvres Complètes [Paris: Vrin, 1965], 12:53-54), Malebranche shows that all understanding of finite beings refers to the idea of the infinite as to their foundation and that the "knowledge" of this ultimate idea has a quality and structure radically different from all other knowledge. If knowledge essentially were a way of objectification and thematization, there would be no knowledge of the infinite. For the Other is neither an object nor a theme and cannot be reduced to them. We cannot posit the Other in front of us in order to limit and measure it by a circumscription of its horizons. The infinite does not permit us to define it.

65 Notwithstanding his effort to do justice to the unique transcendence of the infinite, Descartes insists, in the third and fourth of his Meditations (AT, 9:35-50), on the role played by human autonomy in all forms of knowledge.

66 The exceptional character of the primordial ("ethical," "transcendent," heteronomous as well as autonomous) relation is experienced not only as an obligation and a very special sort of cognition but equally as the most primordial desire. "Desire" (désir) differs, however, essentially from all varieties of need (besoin); indeed, it cannot and does not desire to be satisfied but grows to the extent to which it seems to reach the desired. Since the eros that lies at the root of human existence and philosophy desires the other as Other, it cannot be united or "fulfilled" by her or him. It wants the other to grow in independence and well-being. Desire is a giving of goodness as opposed to the narcissistic urge for union and fusion. Desire does not fill the holes of ego's being (as the satisfactions of one's needs do) but opens up and dedicates. See also the analyses of desire with which TI opens, 3-5/33-35.
the indigence of need. Outside of the hunger one satisfies, the thirst one quenches, and the senses one allays exists the Other, absolutely other, desired beyond these satisfactions, when the body knows no gesture to slake the Desire, where it is not possible to invent any new caress.

Desire is unquenchable, not because it answers to an infinite hunger, but because it does not call for food. This Desire without satisfaction hence takes cognizance of the alterity of the Other. It situates it in the dimension of height and of the ideal, which it opens up in being.

The desires one can satisfy resemble this Desire only intermittently, in the deceptions of satisfaction or in the increases of emptiness which mark their voluptuousness. They wrongly pass for the essence of desire. The true Desire is that which the Desired does not satisfy, but hollows out. It is goodness. It does not refer to a lost fatherland or plenitude; it is not homesickness, is not nostalgia. It is the lack in a being which is completely, and lacks nothing. Can the Platonic myth of love, son of abundance and of poverty, be interpreted as bearing witness to the indigence of a wealth in desire, the insufficiency of what is self-sufficient? Has not Plato, in the Symposium, by rejecting the myth of an androgynous being, affirmed the nonnostalgic nature of desire, the plenitude and joy of the being who experiences it?67

67 This hint at Psalm 23 ("the Lord is my shepherd; I lack nothing") illustrates the difference between Ulysses's nostalgia and the unstillable hunger for justice stemming from another tradition but perhaps recognizable also in Plato's rejection of the androgynous myth told by Aristophanes as an explanation of eros's desires and in his own proposal of another myth (cf. Symposium 189d–193d, 205d–2006a, 203b); CPP 57 translates "en rejetant" in the last sentence of the section inadvertently by "with."

Desire is neither the need for satisfaction nor "the affectivity of love" in its various forms, friendship, erotic love, parental love, or piety, etc. Levinas does not explain this thesis here, but we may be sure that the reason lies in the fact that the different forms of "affective" love are still somehow prolongations or moments of self-love. Cf. toward the end of section 6: "The Desire for the infinite does not have the sentimental complacency of love, but the rigor of moral exigency." In his article "The Ego and Totality" ("Le Moi et la Totalité"), Levinas showed the difference between amour and what he there called socialité. Later on, e.g., in Transcendance et Intelligibilité (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1984), 25–29, he elucidates the affective aspect of the "idea of the infinite," which he then calls "an affection of the finite for the infinite." Notice
How does a face escape the discretionary power of the will which deals with evidence? Is not knowing a face acquiring a consciousness of it, and is not to acquire consciousness to adhere freely? Does not the idea of the infinite, qua idea, inevitably refer back to the schema of the Same encompassing the Other? Unless the idea of the infinite means the collapse of the good conscience of the Same. For everything comes to pass as though the presence of a face, the idea of the infinite in Me, were the putting of my freedom into question.

That the free will is arbitrary, and that one must leave this elementary stage, is an old certainty of philosophers. But for all of them the arbitrariness refers to a rational foundation, a justification of freedom by itself. The rational foundation of freedom is still preeminence of the Same.

Moreover, the necessity of justifying the arbitrary is due only to the failure suffered by an arbitrary power. The very spontaneity of freedom is not put into question—such seems to be the dominant tradition of Western philosophy. Only the limitation of freedom would be tragic or scandalous. Freedom poses a problem only because it has not chosen itself. The failure of my spontaneity is said to awaken reason and theory; a pain is said to be the mother of wisdom. Failure would lead me to put brakes on my violence and introduce order into human relations, for everything is permitted but the impossible. In particular, modern political theories since Hobbes deduce the social order from the legitimacy, the incontestable right, of freedom.

The classical way of questioning freedom is obsessed by its finitude and remains therefore confined to the opposition of the truly free, i.e., rational and reasonable, will and the arbitrary or contingent will. Its hidden wish is to abolish the finitude of the will by making it into a causa sui, chosen and created by itself. The philosophy based on this
The Other's face is the revelation not of the arbitrariness of the will but its injustice. Consciousness of my injustice is produced when I incline myself not before facts, but before the Other. In his face the Other appears to me not as an obstacle, nor as a menace I evaluate, but as what measures me. For me to feel myself to be unjust I must measure myself against the infinite. One must have the idea of the infinite, which, as Descartes knows, is also the idea of the perfect, to know my own imperfection. The infinite does not stop me like a force blocking my force; it puts into question the naive right of my powers, my glorious spontaneity as a living being, a "force on the move."\(^\text{70}\)

This way of measuring oneself against the perfection of the infinite is not a theoretical consideration in its turn, in which freedom would spontaneously take up its rights again. It is a *shame* freedom has of itself, discovering itself to be murderous and usurpatory in its very exercise.\(^\text{71}\) A second-century exegete, more concerned with what he had to do than of what he had to hope for,\(^\text{72}\) did not understand why the Bible begins with the account of creation instead of putting us from the first before the first commandments of Exodus. Only with great difficulty did he come to concede that the account of creation was all the same necessary for the life of the just man: for if the earth had not been *given* to man but simply *taken* by him, he would have possessed it only as an outlaw. Spontaneous and naive possession cannot be justified by virtue of its own spontaneity.

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\(^{70}\) As noted above in Chapter Two (69 n. 71), the expression "une force qui va," frequently used by Levinas, is taken from Victor Hugo's *Hernani*, 3:2.

\(^{71}\) The primordial experience of conscience is the discovery of one's being guilty of having taken away the other's possibilities of existence; it is not the mere discovery of my being the ground of ontological negativity, as analyzed in Heidegger's chapters on *Gewissen* (SuZ, §§54–60). Cf. the quote from Pascal quoted in note 37 above.

\(^{72}\) Cf. the three basic questions formulated in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* A 805/B 833: (1) What can we know? (2) What ought we to do? and (3) What may we hope for?
Existence is not condemned to freedom, but judged and invested as a freedom. Freedom could not present itself all naked. This investiture of freedom constitutes moral life itself, which is through and through a heteronomy.

The will that is judged in the meeting with the Other does not assume the judgment it welcomes. That would still be a return of the Same deciding about the Other in the final analysis—heteronomy absorbed in autonomy. The structure of the free will becoming goodness is not like the glorious and self-sufficient spontaneity of the I and of happiness, which would be the ultimate movement of being; it is, as it were, its converse. The life of freedom discovering itself to be unjust, the life of freedom in heteronomy, consists in an infinite movement of freedom putting itself ever more into question. This is how the very depth of inwardness is hollowed out. The augmentation of exigency I have in regard to myself aggravates the judgment that is borne on me, that is, my responsibility. And the aggravation of my responsibility increases these exigencies. In this movement my freedom does not have the last word; I never find my solitude again—or, one might say, moral consciousness is essentially unsatisfied, or again, is always Desire.

The unsatisfiedness of conscience is not simply a suffering of delicate and scrupulous souls, but is the very contraction, the

73 Against Sartre's famous statement that we are "condemned to freedom" ("condamnés à la liberté"), Levinas elucidates the judgment that we perceive in the experience of shame by way of another metaphor: like a knight who has received an investiture, we do not primarily possess a home and land of our own but first of all have received the task of protecting widows and orphans, the poor, and the stranger, i.e., any other in its nakedness and vulnerability.

74 Since my responsibility is infinite, I cannot get rid of my guilt and shame. Although I accept (accueille) the judgment telling me this, I cannot "assume" it, if "assume" is an equivalent of assimilation or integration; by integration the judgment would no longer come from the "outside," the Other, but would become an element of my soul conversing with itself. The judgment that declares me responsible precedes any possibility of choice or consent.

75 With "the ultimate movement of being," Levinas alludes to Heidegger's description of the temporal existence (and kinesis) of Dasein as accorded to it by Being. Its content is not the spontaneous self-realization according to the rules and reasons of an autarchic ego establishing itself in solitary happiness (this sounds rather Aristotelian) but rather its converse: a primordial belonging to the Other, who steals from me my time, possessions, and happy solitude. Goodness is not a satisfied source of abundance but rather the exhaustion of someone who does not possess his/her own life because it is taken away by the other's existence.
hollow, the withdrawal into itself, and the systole of consciousness as such. Ethical consciousness itself is not invoked in this exposition as a "particularly recommendable" variety of consciousness, but as the concrete form of a movement more fundamental than freedom, the idea of the infinite. It is the concrete form of what precedes freedom, but does not lead us back to violence, the confusion of what is separated, necessity, or fatality. 76

Here above all is the situation in which one is not alone. But if this situation does not yield proof of the existence of the Other (Autrui), this is because proof already presupposes the movement and adherence of a free will, a certainty. Thus the situation in which the free will is invested precedes proof. For every certainty is the work of a solitary freedom. As a welcome of the real into my a priori ideas, an adhesion of my free will, the last gesture of cognition is freedom. The face-to-face situation in which this freedom is put into question as unjust, in which it finds it has a master and a judge, is realized prior to certainty, but also prior to uncertainty. 77

This situation is an experience in the strongest sense of the term: a contact with a reality that does not fit into any a priori idea, which overflows all of them—and it is just for this reason that we have been able to speak of infinity. No movement of freedom could appropriate a face to itself or seem to "constitute" it. The face has already been there when it was anticipated or constituted; it collaborated in that work, it spoke. A face is pure experience, conceptless experience. The conception according to which the data of our

76 Against all philosophies of freedom—from Descartes and Spinoza to Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Sartre, and Heidegger—Levinas claims that freedom is secondary vis-à-vis conscience. This is the originary mode of Dasein and consciousness that precedes freedom, but not as violence or magical union ("participation" and "confusion"), since its urgency is not a physical constraint or a blackmailing order. It is not a historical or otherwise contingent Geschick (fatality), either, because the primordial command precedes and transcends all history. Against the doxa (and dogma) of Parisian neo-Hegelians and Marxists of the fifties declaring that "history judges morality" ("l'histoire juge la morale"), we must have the courage to state that conscience judges history ("la morale juge l'histoire").

77 These are allusions to Hussed’s famous fifth meditation of the Cartesian Meditations. The way in which the problem is formulated there shows a solitary ego urging itself to reach certainty about the existence of other, similar egos. Levinas’s description of the immediate "experience" of the other (as not similar) shows that the ego is primordially nonsolitary and in contact with the Other (through an asymmetric relationship). This primordial, "a priori" relation precedes the dimension of thematic and objectifying argumentation in which the opposition of certainty and uncertainty must be located.
senses are put together in the Ego ends, before the Other, with the de-ception, the dispossession which characterizes all our attempts to encompass this real. But the purely negative incomprehension of the Other, which depends on our bad will, must be distinguished from the essential incomprehension of the Infinite, which has a positive side, is conscience and Desire.\textsuperscript{78}

The unsatisfiedness of conscience, the de-ception before the other, coincides with Desire—this is one of the essential points of this exposition. The Desire for the infinite does not have the sentimental complacency of love, but the rigor of moral exigency. And the rigor of moral exigency is not bluntly imposed, but is Desire, due to the attraction and infinite height of being itself, for the benefit of which goodness is exercised. God commands only through the men for whom one must act.

Consciousness, the presence of self to self, passes for the ultimate theme of reflection. Conscience, a variation on this theme, a species of consciousness, is taken to add to it the concern for values and norms. We have raised several questions concerning this: can the self present itself to itself with so much natural complacency? Can it appear, shamelessly, in its own eyes? Is narcissism possible?\textsuperscript{79}

Is not moral conscience the critique of and the principle of the presence of self to self? Then if the essence of philosophy consists in going back from all certainties toward a principle, if it lives from critique, the face of the Other would be the starting point of philosophy. This is a thesis of heteronomy which breaks with a very venerable tradition. But, on the other hand, the situation in which one is not alone is not reducible to the fortunate meeting of fraternal souls that greet one another and converse. This situation is the moral conscience, the exposedness of my freedom to the judgment of the Other (l'Autre). It is a disalignment which has authorized us to catch sight of the dimension of height and the ideal in the gaze of him to whom justice is due.

\textsuperscript{78} The dimension of conscience, desire, primordial experience precedes and transcends the dimension traditionally considered to be the most fundamental. It can be characterized neither by Descartes's search for certainty, nor by Hegel's concept, nor by Husserl's constitution.

\textsuperscript{79} At this point, Levinas refers to his articles "L'ontologie est-elle fondamentale?" (1951), "Liberté et Commandement" (1953), and "Le moi et la totalité" (1954), in which he "has dealt with the different themes relevant to this matter" (see, for the last two essays, CPP 15–46).
The composition of *Totality and Infinity* can be understood as the unfolding of its twofold title. As we will see, through the concept of "totality," the author characterizes the whole of Western philosophy, whereas "the infinite" indicates the transcendence suppressed by that same tradition. Instead of "totality" and "infinity," the first section of the book, however, most often uses the expression "the Same" (*le Même*) and "the Other" (*l'Autre*). Using the conjunction "and" in its title ("the Same and the Other," 1/31), this section establishes a close connection between *the Same* (which concretizes itself in the behavior of a monopolistic ego) and *the totality* of Greek and European philosophy, whereas, on the other hand, *the Other* (which reveals itself in the human face) is closely associated with *the infinite*. The relation between the Same (or the totality) and the Other (and/or the infinite) is the proper "topic" of the book, whose subtitle ("an essay on exteriority") characterizes the Other as a reality that cannot be integrated or "sublated" into any consciousness, spirit, or other form of interiority. Such a relation is not possible unless its two terms are in a very strong sense of the word *exterior* to each other. Their separation from one another must resist all attempts at fusion or totalizing. They are not and cannot become two moments of one union. This implies their independence: the One and the Other have each a being of their own. For the sameness of the ego, in relation to the whole of its world, this means that its existence is not a part or shadow of the infinite; its concrete mode of existence is described in the phenomenological analyses that constitute section 2 of the book (79–158/107–83). Since the Same reveals itself in the form of the self-centered ego, whose wants and autonomy impose their law (*nomos*) on the