

| A Commentary
on "Philosophy and
the Idea of the Infinite"

Having taught several courses on the thought of Emmanuel Levinas as expressed in *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, I have found no better introduction to the reading of these books, especially the first, than the 1957 article "Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite."¹ Not only does this essay show clearly how Levinas's works sprang from a profound meditation on the very roots of Western philosophy; it also indicates the path by which his thought separates itself from the Husserlian and Heideggerian versions of phenomenology, to which he is nonetheless heavily indebted. In comparing this article with *Totality and Infinity*, one gets the strong impression that it was the seed from which Levinas developed the book. Indeed, it is notable that the argument of the essay follows in almost all points the argument of the summary of *Totality and Infinity*, which Levinas, after defending his book as a dissertation for his *doctorat d'Etat*, published in the *Annales de l'Université de Paris*.² The one notable difference is that the essay deals with the face (section 4) before speaking of desire (section 5), while *Totality and Infinity* and its summary reverse this order. The purpose of the running commentary on "Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite" that follows here is primarily didactic and introductory: through a series of notes on the article, the main lines of *Totality and Infinity*'s argument will emerge, as well as its important connections with the sources of Western thought.

1 "La philosophie et l'idée de l'Infini," *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 62 (1957): 241-53, collected in *EDHH* 165-78; *CPP* 47-60.

2 Cf. *Annales* 31 (1961): 385-86.

I Autonomy and Heteronomy

Without indulging in the despair of the skeptics or the cynicism of the sophists, Levinas begins with what could pass for a platitude, were it not the point of departure for all Western philosophical and even cultural undertakings: the passion for truth realizes itself through inquiry. The sciences themselves would lose all nobility if they did not, in their own fashion, inquire after the truth of things.

In calling the philosophical passion *eros*, Levinas refers, at the very beginning of his study, to the father of philosophy. In some way, and beyond Nietzsche's critique, we must "recover Platonism," as the end of the aforementioned summary clearly states.³

The idea of truth presents itself as an idea with two faces, both of which have called forth the reflection of thinkers since the beginning of wondering. Truth is looked for and understood, on the one hand, as something that the thinker does not yet know—to find it one must have an *experience*, that is, one must be surprised by an encounter with the unexpected. On the other hand, truth only gives itself to someone who appropriates and integrates it, becoming one with it as if it had always been present in the depths of the soul.

In later texts, Levinas claims that "truth," as the ideal of Western philosophy, already leans too much in the latter direction, that of integration, anamnesis, and freedom, while the former aspect—contact with the most "real" reality—is then characterized as a relation that surpasses *being* and *truth*. "Truth" then is considered to be equivalent to the truth of Being. Even the word "experience," which serves here to indicate the surprising aspect of the discovery of truth,⁴ will later be reserved for the world of integration and totalizing autonomy.

3 Cf. *Annales* 31 (1961): 386. Cf. also *HAA* 55–56 for a new Platonism as antidote against a world disoriented and "dis-occidentalized."

4 The French expression "vers l'étranger" (*EDHH* 167), synonymous with the immediately following "vers là-bas," has been translated as "toward the stranger" (*CPP* 47). This might, however, hide an aspect that is crucial to Levinas's thought, who again and again insists on the fact that truth comes from the outside, from afar and *abroad*. *L'étranger* has two meanings and is intentionally ambiguous; it expresses simultaneously the foreign country from which the truth comes to me and the stranger who knocks at my door in order to receive the hospitality of my home.

In *Totality and Infinity*, the word "being" (*être*) is mostly used in a sense close to that of traditional ontology. "Experience" indicates, for the most part, a phenomenological experience, for example, a "concrete moral experience" (TI24¹⁷/53²⁰); the experience of the infinite is called "experience *par excellence*," and the Other (*Autrui*) is the correlate of an "absolute experience" (194³²/219¹⁰), but this absolute experience is a "revelation" (*révélation*) in contrast to an "unveiling" (*dévoilement*, a translation of Heidegger's *Enthüllung* [TI 37²², 39⁴, 43¹/65³⁷, 67¹², 71⁷]). Sometimes, however, the universality of experience is disputed, as, for example, when it is contrasted with the relation to the Infinite (xiii³³/25²⁰; cf. 167³⁷/193¹³), where Levinas contrasts "sensible experience" with transcendence, or when it is distinguished from sensibility as enjoyment (110²⁶/137¹²). In *Totality and Infinity*, the word "truth" is used in two different senses. In many places, it indicates the goal of philosophy as the search for truth (31–35, 54–56, 59³⁵/60–64, 82–84, 87²⁴), the absolute other of transcendence (xvii²⁷/29¹⁵), truth as the revelation beyond the unveiling of being (31³⁷, 76¹⁴/60²⁵, 103³) and above the judgment of history (225¹⁵/247¹³). In other places in the same book, truth is contrasted with the Good (xii²⁷/24¹⁸) or with the moral dimension preceding it (55^{31–39}, 75¹¹, 175¹⁸, 177¹, 195³³, 196^{22–26}/83^{30–38}, 101³¹, 201¹, 202¹⁹, 220²⁵, 221^{19–23}).

The book *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence* in its entirety, from its double title to the last page, sets out to show that the language of ontology—in which being and essence, experience, phenomenality, showing (*monstration*), the present, and truth occupy center stage—is a secondary language dependent on a Saying (*Dire*) that precedes it, pierces it, and transcends it (cf. Levinas's own statement at the end of his autobiographical "Signature": "After *Totality and Infinity* it has become possible to present this relation with the Infinite as irreducible to 'thematization' . . . The ontological language still used in *Totality and Infinity* . . . is thereafter avoided. And the analyses themselves do not refer to the *experience* in which a subject always thematizes what it equals, but to the *transcendence* in which it is responsible for that which its intentions do not encompass" (DL 379/"Signature," 188).

In Husserlian language, the beginning of the article can be rendered in the following manner: the two aspects of truth, which together constitute the "noema" of philosophical intentionality, are linked to two aspects of inquiry (*recherche*). The relation between "noesis" and "noema" is thought by Husserl to be a perfect correspondence between an element of consciousness and an element of phenomenal givenness. However, Levinas immediately criticizes several presuppositions of phenomenology and,

notably, Husserl's theory of intentionality. Even the word "phenomenon" loses its universal significance, ceding the primary place to something other than that which shows itself "in flesh and bone." In *Totality and Infinity*, for example, the author rejects intentionality's universal claim while preserving the primordial importance of "experience."⁵ "Phenomenon," which is opposed to revelation and epiphany, is criticized together with "unveiling" as a nonultimate reality.⁶

The foreignness and the alterity essential to the surprise element of all genuine experience are evoked with an expression used by Vladimir Jankélévitch in a few Plotinian pages of his book *First Philosophy*, the subtitle of which is *Introduction to a Philosophy of the Almost*.⁷ The "absolute otherness"⁸ that characterizes the Plotinian One separated from everything else is understood by Levinas before all else as something that surpasses all "nature." Because "nature" since Aristotle has been the "object" treated by "physics," one could also say that the "absolutely other" is something "beyond" the physical, and so something "meta-physical." Thus, we read on the third page of *Totality and Infinity* that "metaphysical desire tends towards something totally other," "towards the absolutely other," while "Transcendence and Height" refers to "Kierkegaard's entirely other."⁹

That which we experience surpasses nature in two ways. First, in that it does not belong, as a moment already known or anticipated (if only by a Heideggerian *Vorverständnis* or "pre-comprehension"), to the being of someone who has the experience. That which is given in experience surpasses that which is natural to us; it cannot be extracted like a part of something we possess from birth. In this, empiricism will always win out against the defenders of innate ideas.

Experience also leads us beyond the whole of nature, whether this is understood in the sense of the Aristotelian *physis*, which Heidegger tried to reconstitute through his

5 *TI* xv¹²⁻¹⁵, xvi n. 1, xvii^{5-9,22}, 62²⁰⁻²¹, 81, 94-95/27⁷⁻¹⁰, 28 n. 2, 28²⁵⁻³⁰, 89^{39-90,2}, 109, 122.

6 *TI* xvi⁶⁻⁹, 157², 187²⁵⁻²⁶, 190¹²⁻¹⁴/27³⁸-28¹, 181³⁴, 212¹⁹⁻²¹, 215⁵⁻⁷.

7 V. Jankélévitch, *Philosophie première: Introduction à une philosophie du presque* (Paris: P.U.F., 1954).

8 Cf. Jankélévitch, 120-22.

9 Cf. TH 94 and, for example, S. Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments by Johannes Climacus*, trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1985), 45.

commentaries,¹⁰ or in the Spinozian sense, where it is equivalent to the entire universe. For in both instances, nature cannot really resist the human wish to dominate or integrate it as a medium, an instrument, or an extension of human existence. The second chapter of *Totality and Infinity* describes the manner in which nature is made to submit by the ego through consumption, dwelling, manipulation, work, and technology, as well as through aesthetic contemplation. If it is true that we are not strong enough to dominate nature effectively, knowledge (*connaissance*) still manages to accomplish its goal: the natural universe bends and is delivered to the power of the human gaze and to the theory in which a human perspective is developed through operations of the intellect. The material resistances that nature opposes to human attempts at mastering it provide us the same service: one can use them to construct lodgings where one feels "at home" (*chez soi* or, as Hegel puts it, *zu Hause in der Welt*) and to convert them into energy for replacing human labor in submission to our plans.

With regard to Levinas's discussion of Heidegger's "ontology," which will be made more explicit in section 2, it is important to notice the close affinity, or even the identity, between "nature," "physis," and "Being" (*être*) as suggested here. A text in which they are identified even more clearly is the paper delivered at the seventeenth World Congress of Philosophy, "Détermination philosophique de l'idée de culture," printed in *Philosophie et Culture. Philosophy and Culture*, Montréal 1986, 75–76.

The first characteristic of the discovery of the true—the fact that truth is in some way "super-natural" (*sur-naturelle*), i.e., meta-physical—is followed by a determination borrowed from Plato; the true is not only *other* than she/he who has an experience of it and *exterior* to the nature wherein the human subject has settled but it is also *more* than exterior, it is "over there" (*là-bas*) and "up there." Indeed, the alterity and foreignness of the true are distinguished by a special quality that must be described as a type of highness (*hauteur*)¹¹ and

10 Cf. Heidegger, "Vom Wesen und Begriff der *Φύσις*: Aristoteles, Physik B,1" ("On the Essence and Concept of Physis in Aristotle's Physics B1"), in *Wegmarken*, GA 9:239–301.

11 *Hauteur* should be rendered, in everyday language, as "height." The slightly antiquated and solemn "highness" has been used here in order to express the venerable character of the Other and to maintain the connection with the frequently used adjective

divinity. Absolute otherness comes to me and surprises me from on high.

At this point, a thorough reading of the pages where Plato refers to the region of truth and true being can show how their retrieval by Levinas transforms them into a vision that, notwithstanding profound differences, continues their deepest inspiration. In the *Republic* 484c, Plato shows that political wisdom can only be founded on a movement of the gaze to “over there” (*ekeise*), where the truly true (*to alèthestaton*), that is, pure being, is offered as the grand paradigm of the soul desiring to care for the social realm. According to Plato, that which is over there (*enthade*), the dimension of the ideas or the ideal, finds itself contrasted with the world here below.

In the *Symposium* (211d–212a), the difference between a trivial life (*bios phaulon*) and the life of somebody who enjoys the contemplation of the ideal Beautiful, unmixed and in all its purity, is described as a gaze that directs itself over there (*ekeise blepōn*), which is only possible after a long ascension of different stages comparable to the ascension toward the Good described in the *Republic* VI–VII. That this ascension is not only a difficult voyage requiring an ascetic life but also a very serious and radical “moving” from one place to another (*a metoikēsis*) can be seen most dramatically in the *Phaedo*, where philosophy is presented as a meditation on death and as a journey (*apodēmia*) that leads from here below (*enthende*) toward another land over there (*ekeise*), which is the land of the living gods (117c; cf. 61de and 66bd). The search for truth is an uprooting brought about by the experience of absolute otherness, which will not allow itself to be reduced—neither by a simple empiricist or rationalist logic nor by dialectic—to the world that is familiar to us. All of the movement of Plato’s thought in these dialogues proves that for him the “over there” is equivalent to the “up there.” That which is revealed to experience as foreign is the ideal, the high, the divine. The search for truth is not uniquely a discovery of the exterior but a transcendence or—as *Totality and Infinity* expresses it—a “transascendence”¹² toward a dimension that commands us, in a certain sense, as superior.

haut, “high.” Another related term, *là-haut*, could not be rendered with a cognate of “high” and has been translated as “up there”; its literal connection to the notion of highness should still be borne in mind.

¹² Cf. *TI* 5^{28/35}²⁵ and my commentary on pp. 132–34 of this book.

In light of Levinas's later analyses, the Platonic image of a voyage that transports us toward another country must neither be interpreted as a symbol of a transcendence toward a "world" or "heaven of Ideas" beyond our world nor as petition for a new type of netherworld. The elimination of any kind of *Hinterwelt* is taken seriously.¹³ However, the circular odyssey of all Greek and modern philosophies is replaced by the uprooting of Abraham, forced to leave the intimacy of his home and his country to go toward an unknown somewhere-else (cf. Genesis 21:1). The conversion required by Plato (*Republic* 515c–e, 518b–519c) must be reinterpreted in line with the alienation of this uprooting; as one becomes different through contact with absolute otherness, one never returns to the exact point of departure.

Thus one sees, in the structure of all true experience, the law of alterity and heteronomy, which can never be reduced to autonomy or the law of the Same; nevertheless, the latter is *also* essential to the search for truth. In choosing the word "metaphysics" to characterize this search, Levinas announces his critique of Heideggerian ontology and of the critique of metaphysics, which is its reverse side. Against the project of the overcoming of metaphysics characterized as onto-theo-logy, Levinas defends the deepest intention of metaphysics while refusing to return to an onto-theo-logy in which the Divine is conceived as a first cause or supreme being. All of this is summarized in the first three sentences that, after the preface, open *Totality and Infinity*.¹⁴

The second aspect of the way toward truth is determined by the fact that truth gives itself only to the person who appropriates it in total freedom. In the fourth *Meditation*, Descartes brought to light the moment of free will that is part of all true judgments. Of course, it is not necessary to be a Cartesian to recognize the free character of all theory if what one means by freedom is the absence of all exterior constraints and victory over all alienation by the appropriation and possession of all that at first seems astonishing and foreign. As Aristotle expressed it at the beginning of the *Metaphysics*, the project of traditional philosophy wanted, as much as possible, to go beyond the astonishing (*thaumasia*) by a comprehension for which the phenomena show themselves self-evident in their being such as they are. And Plato, in

¹³ Cf. *HAH* 57.

¹⁴ "La vraie vie est absente.' Mais nous sommes au monde. La métaphysique surgit et se maintient dans cet alibi."

explaining all new knowledge as the result of an anamnesis, had already reduced all surprise to a form of memory and interiority.¹⁵ In adhering to the truth as proposed, the searcher is not really shocked, surprised, wounded, or touched by it. The appropriation of the truth reduces it to the immanence of the knower's consciousness. Since Socrates, philosophy has tried to (re)construct and (re)build theoretically the universe of being in the element of lucid intuitions and transparent concepts. The deepest motivation for this project was the wish to be free, at home, in that which at first presented itself as alienation. The roots of Western civilization lie in an attitude that precedes its theory as well as its practice: the human subject affirms itself as a freedom engrossing and reducing to itself all that resists its powers, even if only by the obscurity of its being. Thought's ideal is the integration of everything in the immanence of a total knowing. Freedom and immanence! The reduction of all alterity to the reflexive identity of a supreme consciousness is the ideal of *autonomy*, the legislation of the *Same*.

With the formula "man's conquest of being through history," Levinas alludes to the neo-Hegelian language that, in the 1950s, was the koine of Parisian intellectual circles. With Hegel, one can read the history of humanity as a grand voyage toward the discovery of the auto(de)monstration of the universe of beings. We will see that the formula, with an important but not radical distinction, can also be applied to the thought of Being by which Heidegger attempts to surpass the traditional theory of the "whole of all beings" (*das Ganze des Seienden*). Even in Heidegger's view, the horizon of all understanding is the light of Being illuminating itself within the openness that constitutes human *Dasein*.

The reference to Hegel's philosophy of history passes on to a formula that summarizes the whole of Western philosophy: freedom is *the reduction of all Otherness to the Same* (*la réduction de l'Autre au Même*). Here one should reread the *Sophist* in the light of the epistemological combat between those who defend autonomy and those who defend heteronomy. It is not by chance that Levinas recalls at this point—as he also does at the beginning of *Totality and Infinity*—the dialogue cited by Heidegger on the first page of *Sein und Zeit* to orient the reader toward the question of the meaning of Being (cf. *Sophist* 244a), which is for Heidegger the ultimate and first and, indeed, the unique question of philosophy. Levinas quite agrees that Western philosophy,

15 Cf. *Meno* 80d–82e; *Phaedo* 72e ff.; *Phaedrus* 249bc.

since Parmenides, has been a "gigantomachy in relation to being" (*Sophist* 246a, cf. *Sein und Zeit*, beginning of part 1), but he also makes it understood, alluding to other pages of the same dialogue, that it is not the conceptual pair of *on* and *me on* but rather that of *tauton* and *heteron* that is the most radical.¹⁶ By stressing the fact that the *Same* and the *Other* are "mixed" with the other "supreme genera" (Being, Resting, Movement) while remaining, themselves, "without mixture" (*Sophist* 254e), one could make a case that *they* are the ultimate and absolutely first categories. For Levinas, as for Heidegger, all of this is concerned with "first philosophy" or with that which is the most "fundamental." But rather than an ontology or thought of being, first philosophy should be a thought of the irreducible relation between the other and the same, a relation that cannot be absorbed in the totality of a supreme being or of universal Being integrating all alterity as a moment of itself.

The questions of *philosophia prima* cannot be separated from the question of man. The reduction of all phenomena to the Same is the fact of a subject that denies the alterity of all otherness as it reveals itself in the subject's experience. The monism of Parmenides, having survived all attempts at parricide, has shown its true face in the modern celebration of the human ego. The project of autoaffirmation, clearly represented by the various forms of idealism, grounds at one and the same time a theory of categorical structures of reality and an anthropology where the I figures as the point of convergence and center of reality. The ego, conquering being and identifying it with itself through a history of (re)productive negations, is the source and end of all that is. Thus Western thought can be characterized as an "egology" in a sense much more critical than the one in which Husserl employed the term.¹⁷

It is important to realize that the freedom which inspires the "Western project" precedes both theoretical and practical expressions. Moreover, the search for truth is never limited to scientific or philosophical activity alone; as Heidegger has shown, it is a way of being or existing in the verbal and transitive sense that the words "to be" and "to exist" received in his meditations.

¹⁶ Cf. also *Timaeus* 35ab and *Theaetetus* 185cd.

¹⁷ EDHH 168. Cf. Husserl, *Ideen* 2:110; *Erste Philosophie*, 172–73 and 176; *Die Krisis der europäischen Menschheit und die Philosophie*, 258. Levinas quotes from the *Krisis* in the article "M. Buber, G. Marcel et la philosophie," *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 32 (1978): 509.

Truth comes to the fore—“*se produit*,” as *Totality and Infinity* puts it—in many ways, among which there are many practical and affective ones. The “level” on which the most radical intention of philosophy should be defined precedes the schism between theory and practice.¹⁸ The diagnosis given is thus one of Greek and Western existence as such.

It may seem rash to undertake the apology of a certain heteronomy against an ideal of autonomy extolled by philosophy from the beginning. Has not the struggle for emancipation against all forms of alienation been at the very heart of the philosophical enterprise, beginning with the Socratic and Platonic struggles against tyranny and the rhetorical violence of the Sophists, against the appearances of truth paraded about by public opinion? In the ninth book of the *Republic*, Plato describes at length the sickness and enslavement of the soul that results from an absolute faith in *doxa*. Levinas cites the words that Valéry puts into the mouth of “Monsieur Teste” (who is a symbol for the thoughts in the Cartesian head or *tête*) with which the character explains the existence of other captive souls: “Only for others are we *beautiful, extraordinary!* They are eaten by the others.”¹⁹ Still, we will see that there is another way of “being-for-the-others,” a way that neither falls into slavery, nor becomes a tyranny using disguises and other forms of hidden violence.

A soul that abandons itself to opinion and conforms to the thoughts and wishes of “the others” resembles the way of being described by Heidegger in *Sein und Zeit* §27 as the existence of the impersonal everyman with its common sense. A Platonic explication diagnoses this as a function of the difference between the realm of *doxa* here-below and the realm discovered by looking and searching up-there. Levinas adds that abandonment to the domination of public opinion (and all its radio and television apparatus) presupposes that it is possible to lose oneself in a human collectivity, as if an unbridgeable separation did not exist between human individuals. Such a loss of self (*ipséité*) was found in the mythical and magical existence of primitive cultures as described by Lévy-Bruhl.

¹⁸ Cf. *TI* xvii/25: “The traditional opposition between theory and practice will disappear in light of the metaphysical transcendence by which a relation with the absolutely other, or truth, is established. . . . At the risk of appearing to confuse theory and practice, we will treat both as modes of metaphysical transcendence.” Cf. also *TI* 85/113.

¹⁹ Valéry, *Œuvres*, Editions de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard), 2:20. Cf. also *AE* 85¹³/*OB* 61³².

As early as his first book, *From Existence to Existent*, and at greater length in the article "Lévy-Bruhl et la philosophie contemporaine,"²⁰ Levinas had interpreted the participation described by the French ethnologist as a fusion with being's "there is" (*il y a*) wherein one loses all ipseity. In texts dealing more directly with religious topics, found for the most part in *Difficile Liberté*, Levinas contrasts, on the one hand, enthusiasm for a mystical world full of divine elements with, on the other hand, the sober and ethical religion defended by the prophets of Israel against the idols of a magical sacralization. The fusion of the earthly and the divine degrades the latter and deprives humans of their freedom. The background to all philosophies of participation, from Neoplatonism to Louis Lavelle, remains tarnished with a pagan enthusiasm. True religion presupposes a humanity separated from God; their relation is not a mystical union: "The separated being maintains itself in existence all by itself, without participating in the Being from which it is separated" (*TI* 29/58). Without such a separation, there is respect neither for man nor God; it can be called "atheism."

"Faith purged of myths, the monotheist faith itself implies metaphysical atheism. Revelation is discourse; in order to welcome revelation a being apt for this role of interlocutor, a separated being, is required. Atheism conditions a veritable relationship with a true God *καθ' αὐτό*."²¹

Levinas's review of Lavelle's philosophy as contained in *Dialectique de l'Éternel Présent* (1920) and *La Présence Totale* (1934) can be found as early as 1934–35 in *Recherches Philosophiques* 4 (1934–35): 392–95. It does not criticize Lavelle's attempt to renew the "ancient and obscure notion" of a "participation in total being . . . through recourse to a living experience" and states that a "rehabilitation of presence" is "the only means to break the tragic game of the present" Heideggerian times. Still, this rehabilitation must not be accomplished as a wandering outside of time, toward eternity (394–95). Later, in criticizing Simone Weil and Heidegger, Levinas is, however, much more severe with the idea of "participation."²²

²⁰ *EE* 98–100 (60–61) and *Revue philosophique de la France et de l'Étranger* 147 (1957): 556–59.

²¹ *TI* 50⁸/77³. Cf. *TI* 29–31, 49–50, 61, 66, 121, 156, 191/58–60, 77–78, 88–89, 93, 147–48, 181, 216.

²² Cf. *DL* 133–37, 178–88, 299–303. More technical criticism can be found in *TI* 29–30, 32, 52, 61, 66, 91, 155, 169, 193, 207, 269, 231, 293/58–59, 61, 79, 88, 93, 118–19, 180, 195, 217, 231, 293.

Plato and the other great philosophers thought that a truly human existence required a break with “participation.” The existence of the individual, “the soul,” can only be human if it is separated from God as well as from other human individuals. In the name of the humanity of the human being and of the transcendence brought to light above, the insurmountable distance between “separate souls” must be maintained. It is necessary “to maintain the separation of beings, not to founder in participation against which the philosophy of the Same has the immortal merit to have protested” (*EDHH* 172 / *CPP* 54). Nevertheless, the error of this philosophy was to identify the separate existence with the existence of an egological I (*un Moi égologique*) integrating all beings as subordinate moments of the Same. If we want to do justice to alterity and transcendence, as opposed to the magical and violent cultures our century has seen more than one attempt to regenerate, we do not need a new rooting of philosophy in native soil but a new exodus. We are in the process of uncovering a heteronomy that does not abolish the freedom of the ego but rather provides it with its most authentic meaning.

| The Primacy of the Same, or Narcissism

The structure of this section is clear:

1. Paragraphs 1–5 show, through several major examples, how Western thought has been a philosophy of the Same and that its inspiration rests in a fundamental narcissism of an ego which takes itself to be the center and the all.

2. Paragraphs 6 and 7 then pose the decisive critical question: Can this philosophy do justice to the truth of human being? Can humanity as it constitutes itself be recognized in this vision?

3. Paragraphs 8–14 show that Heideggerian thought, no less than classical philosophy, is a celebration of the Same and deserves the same radical criticism.

| Narcissism and Western Thought (paragraphs 1–5)

In privileging the Same, philosophy presents itself as autonomous thought: freedom is affirmed as its principle. Is this principle justified, or is its affirmation arbitrary? The response of the moderns would be that the principle is self-evident and that it is justified by the exposition and development of the philosophical

autoaffirmation; in ridding itself of all alienation, thinking shows that it can (re)produce all truth starting from its own immanence.

As examples of those elements of the universe that autonomous thought tries to integrate, Levinas names the earth, the sky, nature, things (e.g., tools), and people. To a freedom that wants to appropriate them, all of these elements present themselves like obstacles resisting the design of integration. Nevertheless, even if the ego does not overcome them through the violence of enslavement and possession, it subordinates them by giving them to itself in the self-evidence of their truth. To understand this interpretation of the inspiration that animates the theoretical enterprise as it has been developed in the West, one must take note that Levinas here makes use of Husserlian language in order to characterize the fundamental desire of the entire tradition. If, according to Husserl, truth consists of that which reality gives "in flesh and bone" (*leibhaftige Gegebenheit*), so that the intention of the one who looks for truth is "filled" (*erfüllt*) and "accomplished in the evidence" of the given, we again find at this level of the theory the project of a free subject who reduces all that is other to an element of its own immanence. Consciousness encompasses the universe, and transcendence is the possibility of the absorption of all things. The fact that things can be "comprehended by me"—and here one can already hear an allusion to Heidegger's *Verstehen*, which is translated by Levinas as "*compréhension*"²³—shows that their resistance is not absolute. Nevertheless, if there are absolutely other beings, this sort of understanding reveals a form of violence, be it in a provisional, postponed, or hidden way.

The second paragraph of this section interprets the history of philosophy from the basic perspective of the Cartesian and idealistic project, which can also be found in the Platonic definition of philosophy. If Plato in the *Sophist* (263e, 264a) calls philosophy a dialogue of the soul with itself, and if he explains the discovery of new truths by the (re)membering of that which already existed in the depths of the soul,²⁴ truth does not transport the soul toward an outside; its interior dialogue is only a narcissistic form of monologue. All things, and history itself, thus come down to the ideas of an overall consciousness that has no means of transcending itself. The height of narcissism was reached when Hegel deduced, by the logic of the Universal, the very essence

23 Cf., e.g., *EDHH* 68.

24 *Meno* 80 d–e, *Theaetetus* 150a–151d, *Phaedo* 72e ff.

and existence of that being which Aristotle had defined as “an animal possessing reason.”

The last sentence of the second paragraph refers to the third of Descartes’s *Meditations*, where he explains that one cannot be sure that the ideas of exterior things (bodies, angels, animals, and even other men similar to me) are not the products of the “I think,” which makes me an incorporeal substance.²⁵

“The essence of truth,” with which the third paragraph begins, translates the Heideggerian expression “*das Wesen der Wahrheit*,” and it is possible that “the already known” (which it is necessary to discover . . . freely in oneself) refers to the “pre-understanding” (*Vorverständnis*) of Being affirmed in *Sein und Zeit*. In this case, Heidegger would here be placed in the same group as Socrates, whose maieutical teaching also presupposes that the subject of the search contains “always already” (*je schon*, as Heidegger likes to say) the knowledge that must be acquired.

The manner in which Descartes explains the power of reason is different from Plato’s and Heidegger’s explanations because he tries to show, in his fourth *Meditation* (AT, 9:45ff.), that affirmation depends, in the last analysis, on the power of the will; but this theory shows, even more clearly than theirs, that the meaning of truth lies in freedom.

In any case, the project of Western philosophy has excluded the possibility of ego’s transcending itself toward a God who would be absolutely other and irreducible to any element or to the whole of the universe. Under the name of God, the philosophers, as did the theologians, built many idols, as for example Logos, *Esse ipsum*, Substance, Nature, or Spirit, but a God neither known or preknown, nor concealed in the unconscious or preconscious memory of conscience, a God who must *reveal* in order to be accepted—such a God is impossible within the traditional framework. Despite appearances, the thinking West was always without religion (that is to say, without any relation to any absolutely Other) and was thus atheistic, as the beginning of section three shows. In giving this diagnosis of philosophical atheism, Levinas is thinking especially of its neo-Hegelian (including Marxian) and Heideggerian versions.

The rejection of all heteronomy excludes not only the alterity of God but also all individual alterity, thus establishing the

²⁵ AT (*Œuvres de Descartes*, edited by Ch. Adam and P. Tannery in 11 volumes [Paris: Cerf, 1897–1909]), 9:31. Cf. also the beginning of the fifth *Meditation*, AT, 9:50.

typical anonymity of a philosophy that abolishes the uniqueness inherent to individuals. The thematization of the singular reduces all individuality to being a case or instance of a nameless universal; the individual is recognized only insofar as it illustrates, as an example, the conceptual structures by which it is enclosed. The individual as such does not count and cannot even appear; as Aristotle said, science is not concerned with it.²⁶

In the neo-Hegelian climate in which "Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite" was written, references to *mediation* and *dialectic* were almost obligatory. Levinas sees their secret in the triumph of the universal qua nonindividual, anonymous, and neutral (cf. *TI* 12–14, 60/42–44, 87–88). The cunning of reason consists of capturing the object studied in a logical network, i.e., in the fundamental structure of an a priori "knowledge" that nothing can elude.

The first part of section 2 ends by identifying as the source of this philosophy a possessive and domineering attitude, which is also the secret of Western civilization in its entirety. The quest for wealth, its colonial and imperial capitalism, and the project of a totalitarian theory all manifest a single will to power. If the proposed diagnosis is true, it follows that a proposed redress of the faults committed by our culture could not be brought about by a refinement of the sciences or an extension of emancipations but only by a radical reversal that changes our civilization's fundamental intention.

**The Other As
the Calling into Question of Freedom
(paragraphs 6–7)**

It may be that things allow themselves to be treated as elements subordinated to a global and hierarchical system, but do people not somehow resist this? Does their resistance not refute the claims of freedom?

In speaking of human freedom, social philosophers from Hobbes and Rousseau to Hegel and Marx tried to defeat the necessary conflict resulting from a multiplicity of wills by integrating them through contracts into a truer and collective freedom of which they were a part. The idea of freedom as the final

²⁶ *Metaphysics* 999a25–b5; cf. the scholastic dictum: *individuum est ineffabile* and what Levinas says in "Le moi et la totalité," 303; *CPP* 36: "the ego is ineffable."

foundation was not shaken by the repetition of wars. Just as a Platonic ascension toward things up-there required a return (*epistrophè*), so the orientation that can justify freedom requires a radical change of human attitude. In turning toward the alterity of the Other, I discover that my freedom is called into question; the Other's appearance reveals the injustice of my monopoly. If, by the shock of this encounter, the I seeking domination discovers itself to be unjust, this discovery is not a quality added to the preliminary existence of an innocent and neutral freedom but rather the beginning of a new way of existing and being conscious of myself and the world. The original state is not that of an ego enjoying its isolation before it would meet others; from the beginning, and without escape, the Same sees itself related and linked to the Other from which it is separated, and it is unable to escape from this relationship. Thus the principle (*archè*) no longer is the sameness of the selfsame (if it is necessary at all to speak again of principle and not, rather, of the emergence of the "an-archic") but the relation of the Same to Otherness, a relation that can be neither avoided nor reduced to a more original union.

| Heideggerian Ontology | As a Philosophy of the Same | (paragraphs 8–14)

Do the two traits of the Same, as described in paragraphs 1–4, also characterize the thought of Being as presented by Heidegger? Despite Heidegger's critique of the traditional onto-theology, Levinas's response is affirmative. While admitting the discovery of the verbal and transitive sense of Being and the radical importance of the ontological difference, Levinas also recognizes in Heidegger the structures described above. Although Being is neither a universal nor a supreme or foundational being, it illuminates and dominates thought as a Neutral which, nevertheless, does not abolish but affirms the central position of *Dasein*, which replaced the transcendental I of modern philosophy. The supremacy of reason, by which the human subject, according to Plato, feels at home in understanding the world as a realization of ideas,²⁷ is replaced by another relation between *Dasein* and Being, but still *Dasein* stays shut up in its relation to the phosphorescent Anonymous enabling all beings to present themselves to it, without ever producing a true alterity. The truth of

²⁷ *Phaedo* 76 d–e, 100b.

Dasein is that the being which is "always mine" (*jemeinig*) is also a being for which its own being is *the* issue.²⁸ This is why Levinas, without denying the plan formulated in section 6 of *Sein und Zeit*, can say that Heidegger "does not destroy" but "summarizes an entire current of Western philosophy." The "obscure clarity," by which Levinas depicts the clear-obscure of Heideggerian being, refers to Corneille's *Le Cid*,²⁹ while the "mystery" of being could be an allusion to the "*Geheimnis*" that Heidegger speaks of in *Holzwege* and elsewhere.³⁰ Even death, which seems to be the enemy of all ipseity, is interpreted in *Sein und Zeit* as something that can be owned. Despite the expected impossibility, proceeding-toward-death is still a possibility: the "possibility of no longer being able-to-be there" (*die Möglichkeit des Nicht-mehr-dasein-könnens*) or "the possibility of the absolute impossibility of being there" (*die Möglichkeit der schlechthinigen Daseinsunmöglichkeit*).³¹ Authentic existence can assume its being-toward-death, thus realizing a "freedom certain of itself and anguished for death" (*die ihr selbst gewisse und sich ängstende Freiheit zum Tode*), which no longer refers to help or concern of others.³²

The absence of otherness is also marked by the absence of any essential relation to the infinite. The finitude of *Dasein* is not discovered in the distance that separates Descartes's infinity from the limited existence of human beings³³ but rather in *Dasein*'s limited existence, mortality tending to inauthenticity. Since *Dasein*, in this framework, is closed on itself, it can have no other lack than that of a failure in regard to itself. The idea of a debt or guilt toward others than the self is excluded from this thought. By the absence of a true alterity that could question and accuse *Dasein*'s freedom, that is, by the absence of an ethical "principle," the Heideggerian perspective belongs to a tradition the barbarous depths of which were shown by Nazism. When Heidegger criticizes the essence of technology,³⁴ he forgets that

28 *SuZ*, 142, 191ff.

29 Cf. Corneille, *Le Cid*, 4.3.

30 *Holzwege*, 244; *Wegmarken*, 89–94; *Unterwegs zur Sprache*, 140, 148–49.

31 *SuZ*, 250ff.

32 *SuZ*, 266 and §62; cf. also Levinas's commentary in *EDHH* 85–87.

33 Cf. Descartes's *Meditations*, AT, 9:36 and 41, and Plato's *Republic* 508a, 509b, 517b, 518d.

34 Cf. "Die Frage nach der Technik," *VA*, 1: 5–36/QCT, 3–35.

the source of modern evil, such as it was manifested in Nazism, is found at a depth that lies deeper than the realm of technology. Alluding to certain expressions found in Heidegger's later works, Levinas sketches the portrait of a pagan existence rooted in mother earth and prone to exploitation—very different from the sober existence of availability for the needs of others. The individuals are immersed in the *physis* that encompasses them like elements of its unfolding. The intoxication of a polytheistic enthusiasm renewed by Heidegger through his interpretations of Hölderlin and the Presocratics shows by exaggeration what inspiration is hidden at the bottom of the "lucid sobriety" of philosophers.³⁵

In the Western tradition, freedom precedes and surpasses justice; the Same encompasses and envelops the Other;³⁶ monism wins out over the pluralism of existent beings.

| The Idea of the Infinite

The reversal proposed by Levinas is not a simple reversal of terms, as if the Same, Being, Freedom, Power, Conscience, Greece, and Western culture should be swallowed and absorbed by Otherness, Justice, and Judaism. In retrieving the prophetic Jewish tradition, which is "at least as ancient" as the Socratic and Presocratic Greek traditions, it is a matter of doing justice to the Other and, by this, to the relation of the Other to the Same, which thereby receives its true significance.

The call to the tradition of Israel in no way seeks to replace philosophical thought with an appeal to faith. The defense of the Other against the monopoly of the Same can be at least as philosophical as Heidegger's commentaries on a poem of Parmenides or the aphorisms of Heraclitus. It must be possible to formulate and justify the essential points of another tradition in a philosophical and "Greek" language that can be understood by contemporary humanity without necessarily appealing to a particular faith or conviction.

³⁵ Cf. *Republic* 501d2, 563a5, 537d8; *Symposium* 218e7. Cf. also the articles "Le lieu et l'utopie," "Simone Weil contre la Bible," "Heidegger, Gagarine et nous," gathered in *DL* 133–37, 178–88, 299–303.

³⁶ Cf. Plato, *Timaeus* 35ab: the circle of the Same encompasses the circle of the Other; and Levinas, "Philosophie et positivité," in *Savoir, faire, espérer: les limites de la raison* (Brussels: Facultés Universitaires Saint-Louis, 1976), 194–206.

Levinas takes up some elements of Western philosophy by which it opens itself to the second way described in section 1, even though the results have not been developed in the course of Western philosophy. These features are, above all, Plato's affirmation that the goal of the philosophical ascension is found, *beyond being*, in *the Good*, his thesis that real discourse (conceived of elsewhere as an interior dialogue) is a discourse with the gods³⁷ and Descartes's analysis of the idea of the infinite, such as can be found in his third *Meditation*. One could find other hints of true heteronomy at the interior of Western philosophy. Thus, Levinas speaks elsewhere of Aristotle's "from the outside" (*thurathen*),³⁸ of the Platonic and Plotinian One,³⁹ and of Kant's practical philosophy.⁴⁰ The texts most frequently referred to are, however, those of Plato on the Good⁴¹ and those of Descartes on the idea of the infinite.⁴² In the essay considered here, it is the latter text that receives all the attention.

The method by which Levinas proceeds includes two steps: the first phase distinguishes in Descartes the analysis of a fundamental structure that Levinas will separate from its concretization by the relation of the person to God (§3). The formal structure can be called "the idea of the infinite," although Descartes in the third *Metaphysical Meditation* makes no distinction between "the idea of God" and "the notion of the infinite." After this, Levinas asks how a formal structure thus uncovered can concretize itself, or which experience "fills" the intention that this structure represents (§4). The answer will be that only the Other, i.e., any other human, can respond to such an intention.

In order to follow Levinas's interpretation, one must recall some elements of the argument developed in the third Cartesian *Meditation*.⁴³ Wondering how he can be sure of the truth of his idea and judgments (29), Descartes begins with a list of ideas found in his consciousness: "In addition to the idea that represents me to myself," there is also found an idea "that represents

³⁷ *Republic* 517b and 518d; *Phaedrus* 273e–274a.

³⁸ MT 367/CP 39; TI 22/51 Cf. Aristotle, *De generatione animalium* 736b 28; and Husserl, *Formale und transzendente Logik*, 208.

³⁹ EDHH 197, 189, 201

⁴⁰ AE 166/OB 129; Transc. Int. 19–20.

⁴¹ E.g., TI 76, 235/102–3, 257–58; EDHH 189; and Plato, *Republic* 508e, 509b, 517b, 518d.

⁴² TI 18–20/48–50, 185–87/210–12; TH 94, 105; the article "Infini" in the *Encyclopedia Universalis* 8:991–94; Transc. Int. 25–29.

⁴³ AT, 9:27–42.

to me a God, other ideas that represent animals, and still others representing people similar to me" (34). Of all these ideas, however, excepting those of God and me, "I see no reason why they could not be produced by me and why I cannot be the author of them," or, at least, why they would not be "contained in me eminently" (35). "Thus there remains only [apart from the idea of me] the sole idea of God of which it must be considered if there is something in it which could not have come from myself."

Descartes describes this idea as the idea of "an infinite, eternal, immutable, independent, all-knowing, all-powerful substance, by which I myself, and all the other things that are (if indeed it is true that there are things that exist) were created and produced." Thus it is the idea of God of traditional metaphysics. Levinas's purpose is not the saving of this tradition, but he admires in this text the affirmation of the irreducible originality of this idea, an affirmation that remains true when it is stripped of its elaboration by the "natural theology" of the scholastic tradition. The irreducibility is expressed by Descartes's pointing out that the idea of God must necessarily have been "placed in me" by something exterior and transcendent to me "because, although the idea of substance is in me, from the very fact that I am only a finite substance, I could never have the idea of an infinite substance, if this idea had not been placed in me by some substance that is truly infinite."⁴⁴

For Descartes, the idea of the infinite cannot be the result of a negation of something finite "because, on the contrary, it is manifestly clear to me that there is more reality found in the infinite substance than in the finite substance and thus that I have the notion of the infinite in some way before that of the finite."

How would it be possible to know my own finitude (which is manifested, for example, in my doubts and other wants) "if I did not have in me any idea of a being more perfect than my being in comparison to which I could know the defaults of my own nature?" The idea of this "sovereignly perfect and infinite being," which is thus the first of all my notions, cannot be false because it is "very clear and very distinct" and "there is no other

44 AT, 9:36. Cf. also 38: "The idea that I have of a being more perfect than my own being must necessarily have been placed in me by a being which is indeed more perfect"; and 48: "And certainly one must not think it strange that God, in creating me, has placed in me this idea as the mark of the craftsman stamped on his work; and it is not as necessary that this mark be something different from this very work."

notion that by itself is more true."⁴⁵ "And this remains true, although I do not understand the infinite . . . , for it belongs to the nature of the infinite that my nature, which is finite and limited, cannot understand it" (37).

Thus, even for Descartes, the understanding is not the way in which the finite being of the ego is acquainted with the infinite, which has marked it with its imprint. And yet, knowledge of the self includes knowledge of this noncomprehensive relationship:

When I reflect on myself, I know not only that I am an imperfect and incomplete thing depending on other people, as well as desiring and striving continually for something better and greater than I am, but at the same time I know also that he on whom I depend possesses in himself all the great things towards which I am striving and whose ideas I find in myself. He does not only possess them in an indefinite way and potentially only, but he enjoys them in fact, actually and infinitely, and thus he is God (41).

And as if to attempt an intention that goes further than the intention to understand, Descartes ends his *Meditation* on a "contemplation" of this all-perfect God, who causes him to "consider, admire and adore the incomparable beauty of this immense light, at least to the extent that the strength of my mind, which is in some sense blinded by it, can allow" (41).

The text that I have just quoted and paraphrased retrieves in a modern way the Neoplatonic and Christian tradition about the presence of the supreme One in the depth (the "heart," "thought," "consciousness," "mind," or "spirit") of the human essence. Although theologians such as Augustine and Anselm thematized the perfection of this ultimate being in terms of knowledge and—like Descartes, who followed them—tried to present it as the result of so-called "proofs for the existence of God," they always knew and stated that this God could not really be reached by a purely theoretical attitude but by some *other* way, that is, by a deeper and more radical attitude which precedes the distinction between theory and practice: the attitude of adoration and gratitude.

The idea of the infinite, which constitutes the formal design of the Cartesian idea of God, is an "intention" and a "thought" whose "noema" does not fulfill the "noesis" of which it is the correlate because this "thought" (which is neither a concept, nor a conception, nor a mode of understanding) can in no way contain

⁴⁵ AT, 9:36. Cf. section 2 on the difference between the knowledge of the finite according to Descartes and according to Heidegger.

or grasp within its “content.” Here the *ideatum* surpasses the idea. The idea of the infinite *thinks more than it thinks*. In this manner, the infinite shows its exteriority, its transcendence, and its radical highness. Thus it is not the grandeur, the universality, or the all-encompassing and unlimited character that defines the positive infinitude of the infinite but rather its absolute alterity.⁴⁶ By refuting the possibility of applying the fundamental concepts of Husserlian phenomenology (such as intentionality, truth as fulfilling, adequation, evidence, the self-given “in flesh and bones,” etc.), Levinas shows that the idea of the infinite is an exceptional relationship that cannot be described in terms of container and contained. If consciousness cannot contain the infinite, neither can it be exact to reverse the terms. The infinite does not contain the I that is in relation to it. Their relation cannot be transformed in any sort of fusion or union. If their relation did not imply an unbridgeable separation that no mystical or theoretical mediation can abolish, neither the finite nor the infinite would retain its own nature. The idea of the infinite escapes from the soul’s possibility of accounting for its own content, a possibility that Descartes had affirmed in reference to ideas of finite things.⁴⁷ The argument repeated so often by Hegel—according to which an absolute separation between the finite and the infinite would rob the latter of its infinity because the opposition of the infinite to something else would limit it—presupposes that the infinite must surpass all limits and encompass all finite beings. It identifies the infinite, thus, in some manner, with the universe of all that can be. The finite becomes a moment of the infinite (something that “participates” in the life of the infinite), while the infinite is degraded by becoming the totality of all moments.

Thus interpreted, the Cartesian “idea of the infinite” corresponds to that which, in the first section of Levinas’s essay, was indicated as a specific trait of that toward which all experience (in the full sense of the word) transports us. The infinite is the absolutely other, the exterior that reveals itself over-there and up-there, the transcendent that surpasses all of our powers of appropriation. Radical alterity, transcendence, or highness “constitute[s] the first mark of its infinitude.”

⁴⁶ *TI* 11–12/40–42 and 170–71/196–97.

⁴⁷ *AT*, 9:35: “Je ne vois point de raison pourquoi elles ne puissent être produites par moi-même” (“I do not see any reason why they could not be produced by myself”).

By this unique relation with complete otherness, the I is more than it would be were it only an ego with the power to integrate, to anticipate, or to project all things, acts, and thoughts within the horizon of a narcissistic universe. One way of thematizing such an ego is found in the Heideggerian and Sartrean interpretations of the human essence as a project (*Entwurf*) or projection by which all novelty would only be the result of an autonomous deployment giving to existence its own sense.⁴⁸ *The more in the less* that constitutes the Same in its linkage to the Other cannot be deduced from the consciousness or autoconsciousness of an ego but is produced like the initial *mise-en-scène* by which all existence discovers itself already oriented before all initiative of its own.

By his interpretation of the third *Meditation*, Levinas gave a new sense to the ontological argument that “the idea of absolute perfection, coming from St. Anselm and Descartes, expresses the relation to the infinite upon which depends all sense and all truth.”⁴⁹ Levinas’s interpretation thus recalls the statute of the “idea” of the Platonic Good (which is not an idea but rather the source and the light that gives existence to all ideas) or of the Plotinian One. By showing that the “idea” of the infinite does not fall under the same kind of knowledge as other ideas, Levinas retrieves, in a very original way, the old debate on the two main types of knowledge previously placed in opposition to each other: “discursive” knowledge and “intuitive” knowledge, *ratio* and *intellectus*, *Verstand* and *Vernunft*, *Erkennen* and *Fürwahrhalten*. With the great philosophers, as with the mystics, there has always been the certitude that ultimate realities do not reveal themselves to a thinking that wants to *understand*, i.e., that wants to seize its object by circumscribing it at the interior of a horizon. A thinking that thinks without knowing seems to be a contradiction: how can one affirm the truth of a “thing” of which one knows neither the essence nor the quiddity? And yet, how could one affirm a radical relation with someone or something that comes from elsewhere and “from on high” if one can understand all reality as a part, or as the ensemble, of the totality of definable things? Even a rationalist like

48 Cf. J.-P. Sartre, *L'être et le néant* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943), 588–91; Heidegger, *SuZ*, 144 and §§31 and 65; Levinas, *TI* 172–73/197–99.
49 *TI* 11–12/40–42.

Descartes understood that, though we are completely unable to understand the infinite, we must nevertheless affirm, with complete certitude, the truth of the relation that links us to it. The first truth is that the I perceives itself in relation to that which surpasses its understanding.

In a contribution to a book entitled *The Passion of Reason*,⁵⁰ Levinas continued his meditation on Descartes's third *Meditation*. He remained faithful to his first effort but stressed more the affective character of the relation: it is "an affecting of the finite by the infinite" (50). "This affectivity of adoration and this passivity of bewilderment (*éblouissement*)" are the result of the reasoning to which Descartes abandons himself at the end of his *Meditation*. True thinking "does better than to think" (51) because, more than a love of wisdom, thinking finds itself in a "wisdom of desire" that reveals itself to be a "wisdom of love."⁵¹

| The Idea of the Infinite and | the Face of the Other

Having designed, with Descartes, the necessary formal structure of what he still called, at this stage of his thinking, an exceptional "experience," Levinas asks in which concrete experience this structure can realize itself. His response is no longer simply the traditional one of the Greeks or Christian theologians, who identify the absolutely Other with the unique God above finite beings, but the other human. This is not to say that God is suppressed or abolished. The absoluteness and infinitude of the human other can never be disavowed, but the relationship between this Other and the completely other Otherness of God is a question that still must be answered. The initial ambiguity of "the Other" with which I am in relation is expressed in a passage of *Totality and Infinity* where the alterity is said to be "understood as the alterity of the human Other (*Autrui*) and as that of

⁵⁰ Paris, 1983, 49–52. This text was reprinted as the final part of *Transcendance et Intelligibilité*, 25–29.

⁵¹ AE 195/OB 153 and AE 205–7/OB 161–62. However, in TI 187/211–12 already Levinas quoted the end of Descartes's third *Meditation* as the "expression of the transformation of the idea of the infinite, as contained in knowledge, into majesty approached as face."

the Most-High."⁵² Thus, right from the very beginning, "the idea of the infinite is the social relationship."

To determine the specific characteristics of this relationship with a concrete infinity, one must avoid the automatism of a conceptual network developed in relation to finite objects and beings. One must ask, and Levinas does so later, whether thematization as such (and is philosophy not always an attempt at thematization?) betrays the foreign "object" or "theme" that is the Other. Within the traditional conceptualization, all otherness is either converted into a possession or resists such conversion as a force that starts a war. Prey or predator, master or slave, depreciated object or subject dominating everything from its all-encompassing point of view, these are the possible alternatives if we stay within the context of the social philosophy of our tradition. The alterity of the other can, however, show its value only if we manage to transform its metaphysical presuppositions from top to bottom. Even the word *phenomenon* is not adequate for rendering the otherness of the other met by me. The hesitation that can be noticed in Levinas's formulations in this essay shows that the search for another, less ontological language has already begun. "The exteriority of the infinite *manifests itself* in the absolute resistance which—through its *appearance*, its *epiphany*—it opposes to all my powers."⁵³ This search will lead to a distinction between the phenomenon and another way of coming to the fore⁵⁴ and to a radical critique of all monopolistic phenomenology. It will be followed by a critique of all thematization (which, nevertheless, will remain inevitable for philosophy) and lead to the distinction between the Said (*le Dit*) of the text and the Saying (*le Dire*), which can neither be reduced to a theme nor can be grasped by description or analysis.⁵⁵

The apparition of a phenomenon is the emergence of a form into the light of a certain space-time; it is one with the *aisthesis* or *noesis* of a subject open for it. The encounter with the human other, however, is not the union of an act by which two potential beings identify with one another in the transparency of a perception or a concept but rather a shock which, by its (non)apparition, refutes the pretension of the I, which appropriates everything that stands in its way. The other "shows itself" in a different

⁵² *TI* 4/34.

⁵³ *EDHH* 173/*CPP* 55; my italics.

⁵⁴ "Se produire." Cf. *EDHH* 203–16/*CPP* 61–74.

⁵⁵ *AE* 167ff./*OB* 131ff.

manner; his/her way of “being” is other; it “is” in another way than the being of phenomena. That is why Levinas can say in *Totality and Infinity* that the Other is neither given nor visible and that there can be no idea of it.⁵⁶ The truly other Other is invisible (51/78–79): “To be unable to enter into a theme,” “to be unable to appear—invisibility itself.”⁵⁷ In *Otherwise Than Being*, the rejection of the ontological language, which still prevails in *Totality and Infinity*, results even in the thesis that it is inexact to say that the Other’s mode of being is completely other than that of all (other) phenomena, since the Other as such cannot be called “a being.” Transcendence is “passing over to being’s other, otherwise than being. Not to be otherwise, but otherwise than being.”⁵⁸

How could all these negative expressions be replaced by a positive discourse? How must we characterize the *logos* of a discourse that is not indifferent to the excellence of the infinite in relation to everything else? The response to this question cannot be given without recourse to ethical language. The answer to the ontological or metaphysical questions, “Who is the other?” and “What is the ‘principle’ or ‘archè,’ the first ‘truth’ and the ‘base’ of all philosophy?” cannot be given by an objectifying theory in which all otherness ultimately is lost in thematization, but only by the language of commandment: “Thou shalt not kill!” The other “is” the one that we *ought* not (that we do not have the right to) kill.

This answer means neither that we must simply reverse the traditional dependence between theoretical and practical philosophy by making human practice the foundation of all theory, nor that it is necessary to promote moral philosophy as a fundamental discipline upon which one can construct the rest of philosophy. The ethical point of view (or the “moral sense”) is an indispensable perspective for the discovery of how the Other differs from all other reality. The look that raises itself to the Other’s “highness” perceives that she does not manifest herself as a phenomenon but reveals herself as an epiphany of the infinite, of absolute otherness. In this way, the I awakens to the impossibility of behaving or interpreting itself in terms of autonomous power. “I can” (*Ich kann*) can no longer sum up human existence, and the

⁵⁶ TI 4/34.

⁵⁷ EDHH 224/CP 115–16.

⁵⁸ AE 3/OB 3. This is also programmatically stated by the title “Otherwise Than Being” (and not “Being otherwise”).

“able-to-be” of possibility (*Seinkönnen*) is not the most radical human “essence.”⁵⁹ The power of this possibility is nothing bad in itself; on the contrary, it is a necessary moment of the constitution of the I—which itself is not abolished but rather demanded and confirmed by the infinite to which it is related. However, the Other’s existence subordinates ego’s spontaneous capacity of being to an imperative that ego has neither invented, nor chosen, nor freely accepted: it forbids the ruthless accomplishment of ego’s tendency to imperial totalization.

The Other is not a moment within a dialectical order of mutually opposed forces. This is shown by the fact that the “no” against the powerful possibilities of the I does not have the form of a great force or violence but rather of an essential weakness that *forbids* me to continue my project of universal domination. If the Other started a fight against me, thus becoming a warrior, he would be only (like me) an element of a human universe: a country, a realm, a church, or a world, dialectically constructed by means of human sacrifices. The Other, rather, shows his infinity as the most naked, poor, and vulnerable of all weaknesses. A human *face* has no defense.

“Face” is the word Levinas chooses to indicate the alterity of the Other forbidding me to exercise my narcissistic violence. “Language” is another expression of the same nucleus of meaning if it is understood as spoken language or discourse and not as a text detached from its author. The Other regards me and speaks to me; you are my interlocutor; “the face speaks.” This is the concrete way in which I am in relation with the infinite.

With an allusion to the *Phaedrus*,⁶⁰ Levinas characterizes the authority and the height of the look and the word through which the other turns toward me. In his apology for the excellence of the spoken word, Plato writes that it is only the living and animated *logos*, as opposed to the written text, that is capable of bringing help to itself.⁶¹ The Other even replaces, in some way, the “pure act (*energeia*)” in which Aristotle saw the unmoved mover, which brings all other beings in motion by the *eros* that orients them.⁶²

This proximity of the Other as the Highest makes itself felt when my conscience recognizes that the other’s existence forbids

⁵⁹ Cf. Husserl, *Ideen* 2:257ff.; Heidegger, GA 20 (summer 1925): 421; *SuZ*, 191–94.

⁶⁰ *Phaedrus* 274b–277a.

⁶¹ *Phaedrus* 275e, 276a, c, e; cf. *TI* 45, 69, 71/73, 96, 98.

⁶² *Metaph.* 1071b–1073a.

me to hoard certain realities which I need and imposes upon me heavier and more pressing duties than those I have toward myself. While I can sacrifice myself for the other, to require the same of another with regard to me would be the equivalent of murder. "We are all guilty of everything before everyone, and I more so than the rest."⁶³

| The Idea of the Infinite As Desire

"Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite" began with the metaphysical and epistemological question: How can one arrive at the truth? The analysis of experience brought us to the discovery of a relationship more fundamental than knowledge if we understand "knowledge" in the sense of the Greek and modern tradition: a theoretical relation that would be the foundation as well as the perfection of all contact with beings in their being. The more fundamental structure that shows itself in the encounter with the Other has an ethical and imperative character; it is simultaneously the revelation of a *fact* and the source of all *obligations* and *prohibitions*. Thus ethics cannot be understood as a secondary discipline based on a theoretical philosophy, an ontology, or epistemology that would precede any command or normativity. The ethical relation is not a "superstructure" but rather the foundation of all knowledge, and the analysis of this relation constitutes a "first philosophy."⁶⁴ If one uses the words "cognitive" and "objective" to indicate a reality and a truth more originary and radical than those of *theoria*, one could say that the relation which, in the experience of the other, links me to the infinite is "more cognitive than knowledge itself," and that "all objectivity must participate in that relation."

In the second of his *Conversations on Metaphysics and Religion*, Malebranche states:

Note especially that God or the infinite is not visible by means of an idea that represents him. The infinite is its own idea for itself. It has no archetype. . . . Everything finite can be seen in the infinite which includes the intelligible ideas of that thing. But the infinite can be seen only in itself. If one thinks of God, it is necessary that he exists. It is possible that this or that being, notwithstanding its being known, does not exist. We can see its essence apart from its existence,

⁶³ A sentence from Dostojevski's *The Brothers Karamazov* often quoted by Levinas. Cf., e.g., *EI* 105.

⁶⁴ TH 99.

its idea without itself. But we cannot see the essence of the infinite apart from its existence, the idea of its being without its being.⁶⁵

Malebranche shows clearly that all knowledge of finite things is in reference to the idea of the infinite, which serves as their foundation, and that this "ultimate knowledge" is of a different structure and quality. If all knowledge were essentially a way to objectify and thematize the known, there would be no knowledge of the infinite because the Other is never an object or a theme and can never be reduced to such. One cannot place the Other in front of oneself, nor could one embrace it by measuring its horizon. There are no demarcations, there is no definition of the infinite.

While for Malebranche all knowledge and thematization derives from the fundamental relation between the knowing subject and the infinite, Descartes adheres to two theses that are not easy to reconcile. On the one hand, he admits that, from the beginning, the *cogito* is oriented and dominated by the idea of God; on the other hand, the recognition of God's existence as infinite still depends upon a decision of the will of the conscious subject. The second thesis follows from his general theory of the truth as it was propounded in the fourth *Meditation*. If clear and distinct evidence present to the understanding is not enough for a true judgment because it needs also a correct use of the will (whereas error is the result when the will does not remain within the limits of understanding), all knowledge depends on the freedom of the finite subject.⁶⁶ When one does not distinguish a radical difference between knowledge of finite beings and the idea of the infinite, the latter is also subordinated to the exercise of human freedom. Thus, one inevitably returns to the framework of autonomy.

After having given a response, in the fourth section, to the question of which "noema" might correspond to the formal structure found in the third section, Levinas returns to the question of the specific characteristics of this structure by asking in which "noesis" or "intention" the structure manifests itself concretely. If the relation of the I to the absolute Other is not a kind of knowledge or contemplation, is it perhaps *eros* itself, evoked in

⁶⁵ Malebranche, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. A. Robinet (Paris: Vrin, 1965), 12:53–54.

⁶⁶ AT, 9:45–49.

the second sentence of the essay? Let us first agree upon the sense of *eros* as a tendency toward the infinite. If one sees here a profound *need* making us desire that which we do not have, one falls again into an explication by the Same. The I is then seen as an ensemble of privations, and its original tendency would consist of the nostalgia for a satisfaction that could procure plenitude. The paradigm of all human orientations would then be hunger, and the meaning of life would be found in an appeasement of that hunger.

The preceding analyses indicate a different relation than that of the need by which the subject sees beings as prey that it can appropriate and enjoy. Without denying the necessity and value of enjoyment, and without belittling it—on the contrary, enjoyment is necessary for the constitution of the subject as an independent ego that can have a relationship with alterity—the fundamental structure can be characterized as *eros* only if one thereby means a *desire* completely different from need. Far from being a hunger that disappears as soon as it is satisfied, true desire *grows* the more one tries to satisfy it. The desire of the Other can never be satisfied because the closer one comes to the desired, the more one is confronted with the profound distance and separation that belongs to the essence of its alterity. To illustrate the truth of this experience, in which proximity and distance grow with the same intensity, there are not only mystical texts concerning union with a God who remains infinitely foreign and distant; the experience is also felt in more “mundane” experiences, as in the struggle for justice or the experience of erotic love, even though the latter is mixed with a union where the Other and the I are united by a reciprocal love.⁶⁷

By recalling what Plato, in the *Symposium*, writes on *Eros* as the son of *Poros* (“competence” but also “he who abounds”) and *Penia* (“destitution” or “poverty”) and on Aristophanes’ myth of the hermaphrodite,⁶⁸ Levinas asks whether Plato has not had an inkling of the difference between the Greek conception of life as an odyssey that ends at the Ithaca from whence it began and the adventure of a subject such as Abraham or Moses, who began their journeys in order to lose their country and the treasures

⁶⁷ Cf. the analysis of *need* and *desire* in *TI* 3–5, 34–35, 74–78, 87, 89–92, 275/33–35, 62–64, 101–5, 114–15, 117–20, 299 and of *eros* in *TI* 232ff./254ff.

⁶⁸ *Symposium* 203b, 189–193d, 205d–206a; and *TI* 34/63, 87/114–15.

in which they rejoiced. The attitude of the good person is not the nostalgia of a return to an existence one has always lived but the "rectitude" of someone "who does not lack anything."⁶⁹ The exodus of the just is different from the odyssey of a hero; it leads toward a land promised rather than possessed.⁷⁰

As we already said, "Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite" proceeds in the same manner as the summary cited above of *Totality and Infinity*, with one exception: the order in which *the face* and *desire* are presented is reversed. *Before* describing the concrete "experience" of the encounter with the Other (*TI* 9ff./39ff.), the book opens with an analysis of the "desire of the absolute" as primary and original "intention" that replaces the *cogito* and the freedom of the moderns (*TI* 3–5/33–35). Thus, it shows that the nucleus of the Cartesian idea of the infinite (section 3 of the essay) is only the negative side of the desire (section 5) and that both sections are ways of expressing the radical relation of human beings to the absolute Other. Section 4 cuts the description of this relation in two, and the order followed by the book seems simpler and better.

| The Idea of | the Infinite and Conscience

The primacy of the will, the Cartesian version of which was depicted in the previous section, threatens the alterity of the face. If the concept of freedom is the supreme concept, the Other will succumb to the philosophical domination of the Same. The I will then have the comfortable consciousness that the Other is but a thought that belongs to it as a subordinate moment of its own universe. The I must be awakened by the presence, or rather by the word, of the face that uncovers the wickedness of its egocentrism. An autonomous ego is not innocent; its free spontaneity is violence. The Other's emergence puts the freedom of the ego into question.

By will and freedom, neither Descartes nor Kant nor Hegel nor Levinas mean the power to choose freely among different possibilities. Classical philosophy has always insisted on the difference between freedom of choice (or, as Kant puts it, *Willkür*) and the true freedom that obeys reason and reasonable laws.

⁶⁹ Cf. Psalm 23:1.

⁷⁰ *TI* 75/102; *EDHH* 188.

Even thus, as completely rooted in the law and order of universal reason, freedom is still in solidarity with the Same because its ultimate foundation is found in a supreme reason, a transcendental consciousness, a first substance, or a universal spirit, all of which are conceived according to the model of free identity of the spirit with itself.

Modern philosophy, from Hobbes to Marx and beyond, saw that the arbitrariness of the free will had to be subdued in the name of an ideal higher than freedom, but it did not call into question the postulates of the Same from which it started. The tension between true freedom and the power of choice required a foundation in the name of which the spontaneity of inclinations and passions influencing that choosing power is limited. The dialectics of freedom unfolded the opposition between the power of an absolute freedom and the limited power of human choices oriented by a natural and spontaneous expansion. There could be no other evil than the limitation or finitude of freedom. Of course, the ideal of freedom requires that one accept certain limits at subordinate levels, as was known in the traditional view of autodetermination as autolimitation. According to this tradition, pain is meaningful to the extent that it stimulates reason and produces a knowledge that enlarges our autonomy. But all of these limitations had to serve a larger freedom. Radical evil consisted in the ultimate impossibility of being free, in affirming oneself as center and source, in choosing oneself as an autonomous instant.

Most anthropological, sociopolitical, and ethical theories of the modern epoch begin with the same principle: freedom is the source, the end, and the ideal of the Being of beings. The Same triumphs in autonomy, suppressing all radical alterity. Instead of limiting the fight against violence to an attack on the arbitrary in the name of a superior autonomy, one must wake up to a more primordial dimension than that of freedom: the dimension of a measure by which the "fact" of the Other imposes on me the respect of the Other's highness and accuses me in as much as I am "a force that goes," as Victor Hugo puts it in his *Hernani*.⁷¹

The discovery of the Other's respectability is at the same time a feeling of shame with regard to myself insofar as I am

⁷¹ Levinas quotes this phrase rather often; cf., e.g., *TI* 146 and 280/171 and 303; *TH* 100; *DL* 21, 326; it is taken from V. Hugo, *Hernani*, 3.4; cf. V. Hugo, *Théâtre Complet* (Paris: Gallimard), 1:1227: "Je suis une force qui va."

a tendency toward a murderous imperialism and egoism. The seizure of land, a wife, friends, colleagues, associates, and so on treats them as prey and converts me into a murderer. The idea of "creation" implies, at the least, that the meaning which I find in them cannot be reduced to their being possessed or enjoyed by me. The Other is a gift, not only in the sense of a positivistic or phenomenological given but as the irreducible who surprises me unexpectedly, requiring that I place my powers at his/her disposition.

Without in the least devaluing or abolishing it, Levinas discovers in freedom a much deeper meaning than the one it holds in philosophies that place it at the summit of all beings. The Same in the shape of a spontaneous and free ego who appropriates the world in order to be at home in a worldwide realm is a constitutive principle of the primordial relationship and not a fault of which one must be cured or a radical evil making all existence tragic. Without autonomy and a certain egoism, the separation between the Same and the Other would be impossible: the two poles of the relationship would inevitably fuse. However, the autonomy of the I must be submitted to the primordial relation and discover its true significance by respecting the highness of the Other, which gives it its task. With an image borrowed from the feudal world, Levinas calls this "an investiture of freedom."⁷²

A freedom (or autonomy) invested by the Other, *this* is the heteronomous moment that was indicated in the first section of this essay. The rectitude of a just being is the meaning of freedom ordained by such rectitude. Such a being does not concentrate on its own happiness or even on the sublime form in which this happiness can present itself within the framework of a belief in human immortality or soul. It gives less attention to Kant's third question ("What can I hope for?") and more to the second question ("What must I do?") because it has turned from egoistical injustice in order to dedicate itself to the service of the Other.⁷³ As we have already said, this conversion is not the transformation of egoism into altruism but the reversal of the order that relates the one to the Other by henceforth reorienting the being-who-is-at-home and its enjoyment. The Other gives it an ultimate significance that does not abolish the existence of an ego searching for truth but makes its ultimate meaning possible.

⁷² *TI* 57ff./84ff.

⁷³ Cf. *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* A 805; B 833.

Heteronomy or investiture justifies freedom by making it responsible for the Other before a judgment that is chosen neither by the Other nor by me, who finds myself submitted to it. This responsibility grows as one tries to take it. The requirements of justice can never be satisfied; it remains a desire that empties itself in giving what it possesses without end. It is disinterested goodness.⁷⁴

The subordination of freedom to the law of the Other, the heteronomy that links freedom and justice, avoids the impasses of an absolutized autonomy and avoids falling into one of the opposite traps. It does not violate free will but rather gives it direction in giving it a task and a meaning. The subordination protects free will from the confusion of a magical union by maintaining the separation between the Other and me; it avoids the negations of freedom that submit it to a cosmic determinism or a supreme and irresistible *moira*.

By implicitly criticizing the fifth of Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations*, Levinas refutes the traditional approach of the problem of intersubjectivity. He notes that the project of a proof for the existence of other human beings presupposes that the starting point would lie in the isolated existence of an ego conscious of itself. In *Sein und Zeit* (§§27–29), Heidegger had already shown that such a solipsistic ego does not exist because “being-with” (-others) is an existential that, together with other existentials, constitutes the being of *Dasein*. Being-for-the-other or the investiture of ego's freedom has not, however, the same structure as the Heideggerian *Mitsein*, for the latter belongs to a realm of autonomy, while investiture puts ego into question and subordinates its freedom to a higher meaning. Levinas agrees that the relation of ego to the Other precedes the proof for the existence of the Other, and he goes further than Heidegger in affirming that this relation also precedes all knowledge (and thus all modes of *understanding* that can be interpreted as comprehension or knowledge). The reason for this is that all knowledge is a form of appropriation and domination and thus of autonomy. The dimension of knowing is the dimension of a solitary I trying to subdue everything else to the mastery of its thought.

For Husserl, the proof for the existence of other minds was a condition for the possibility of an intersubjective and objective knowledge. But Levinas shows that all knowledge and all certitude are forms of autonomy. If it is true that autonomy discovers

74 *TI* 4/35.

itself as always already invested, there can be no autonomy or certitude preceding the transcendence that orients the one toward the Other. The dimension of certitude and incertitude, or of knowledge in general, can arise only on the foundation of the primordial relation that supports them.⁷⁵ In Husserlian language, it is not possible that a transcendental ego "constitutes" from an unengaged point of view a noema called "face," "word," or "apparition of the other." Rather, one must say that the consciousness of ego finds itself constituted as already related to the Other before any possibility of getting ahold of itself or of identifying itself with itself as consciousness. Nor would it be exact to say that the I "knows" the Other by an "anticipated comprehension" (*Vorverständnis*), as Heidegger thinks. The face (or the word, or the Other) is the most immediate revelation there is. By piercing any sort of concept and perception, it is finally this revelation that procures for us the experience in the strong sense of the word, whose structure this essay has been concerned with from the beginning.

While the essay began with the experience of truth, it ends with the evocation of God. In effect, it is in the commandment that requires ego's freedom to dedicate itself to others that the unique God is revealed, a God that absents itself from all confusion or magical participation. If the search for truth is a voyage toward the *archai*, as Aristotle taught, the principle of principles, the first *archè* preceding all principles, will be the face of the Other awakening me to the meaning of my life (the "an-archic" nature of which will be highlighted in all Levinas's later works). If we define philosophy, with Kant, as a critical enterprise with regard to everything we opine, say, construct, or believe, the measure of any critique reveals itself in moral consciousness, which is not a special genre of "human consciousness" but the supreme criterion upon which all justice and truth depend.

75 *TI* 142-49/168-74.