~~From Ethics to Ontology:~~

A ~~Commentary on Levinas's Early Critique of Heidegger~~
EMMANUEL LEVINAS' E EARLY CRITIQUE OF HEIDEGGER

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This thesis is a critical commentary on key themes in Emmanuel Levinas's early works. In particular, it addresses the development of Levinas's thinking about the project of fundamental ontology initiated by Martin Heidegger.

In the introduction to his first post-doctoral monograph, *Existence and Existents* (1947), Levinas observes that 'If [...] our reflections are in large measure inspired by the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, where we find the concept of ontology and of the relationship which man sustains with Being, they are also governed by a profound need to leave the climate of that philosophy, and by the conviction that we cannot leave it for a philosophy that would be pre-Heideggerian.'

This thesis contends that the central elements of Levinas's philosophical output up to *Totality and Infinity* represent a response to Heidegger's ontological project. It addresses the development of Levinas's thought from his doctoral thesis on Husserl (1930) and his first published essay, 'Martin Heidegger and Ontology' (1932) both of which demonstrate a fundamental sympathy for Heidegger's approach, through to his profound criticisms of Heidegger in his major work dealing with the relationship between ontology, metaphysics and ethics, *Totality and Infinity* (1961).

Contents

This thesis is a commentary on the development of Levinas's thought from his earliest published work (1930) to his major book *Totality and Infinity* (1961). It proceeds by following Levinas's encounter with the thought of Martin Heidegger. My main contention is that Levinas's entire philosophical output can be characterised as an argument with Heidegger.

Levinas's claim in *Totality and Infinity* that ethics is 'first philosophy' follows a long period of increasing distance from Heidegger's thought. Levinas first read *Being and Time* (1927) during his visit to Freiburg in 1928-9 as part of his doctoral studies at Strasbourg. As he put it in an interview in 1982, he 'went to Freiburg for Husserl, but found Heidegger,' and his doctoral dissertation on Husserl, published as *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology* (1930), and his early essay 'Martin Heidegger and Ontology' (1932), both bear the evidence of Heidegger's considerable influence on Levinas's early thought.

After those early admiring works, Levinas first criticisms of Heidegger's ontological approach emerge. In *On Escape* (1936), Levinas speaks of a desire to 'escape' being, and by the time of his next monograph, *Existence and Existents* (1947), Levinas's distance from Heidegger has increased considerably. In that work, he observes that 'If [...] our reflections are in large measure inspired by the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, where we find the concept of ontology and of the relationship which man sustains with Being, they are also governed by a profound need to leave the climate of that philosophy, and by the conviction that we cannot leave it for a philosophy that would be pre-Heideggerian.'[1] In other works in the 1940s and 1950s, Levinas progressively distances himself from

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[1] Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, 1947, (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 2001), 4.

Heidegger's thought, while in each case addressing Heidegger (explicitly or implicitly) as his primary interlocutor during his works of that period. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas advances his most serious criticisms of Heidegger and advances his own most radical claims.

What are the specific points of disagreement in Levinas's argument with Heidegger? The content of Levinas's criticisms of Heidegger changes over the course of the works treated in this thesis, but put schematically their disagreements fall into three areas: the 'ontological' distinction between being and beings and the idea of a 'relation' with being; the notion of subjectivity and the mode of relating to other humans; and the relationship between philosophy and ethics. I address these issues in turn in body of the thesis.

In the first chapter, I address Levinas's work from his doctoral thesis, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Ontology* (1930), up to his work written during the second World War, *Existence and Existents* (1947). As I noted above, Levinas's discussion of Heidegger during the early part of this period is primarily admiring, but in *On Escape* (1934), Levinas's criticisms of Heidegger begin to emerge. In the later works of this period, Levinas advances the notion of a being which is independent of beings which he calls the 'there is' (*il y a*). Nonetheless, in these texts Levinas persists with a conception of philosophy which is strongly influenced by Heidegger, and Levinas's thought remains within Heidegger's ontological framework. I frame my discussion of these works in this chapter in terms of the question of whether Heidegger's conception of the ontological distinction offers anything like Levinas's notion of a 'relation to being.'

In the second chapter, I address Levinas's arguments with Heidegger in *Time and the Other* (1947) and the essay 'Is Ontology Fundamental?' (1951). The chief issue in these works is Levinas's criticism of Heidegger's characterisation of Da-sein's structure of being-with. For Levinas, our relation to the other is not a matter of letting the other be. The other is

not initially understood in his being; rather, the other is encountered as a 'face' (*visage*), in a 'face-to-face' relation. In these works, Levinas introduces the ethical claim about our obligation toward the other which is taken up again in his major work *Totality and Infinity*. I frame my discussion of Levinas in terms of Heidegger's treatment of the concept of being-with in *Being and Time*.

In the third chapter, I examine Levinas's most significant work of mature philosophy, *Totality and Infinity*. In this work, Levinas advances his most ambitious claims about the priority of ethics and the nature of the demand which follows from the encounter with the other. After briefly examining Heidegger's account of the relation between ethics and philosophy, I address the Levinas's key claims of *Totality and Infinity*, where Levinas sets out again his criticisms of what he calls 'Heideggerian ontology' and offers an elaboration of his claim that ethics is 'first philosophy' and that our encounter with the other gives rise to an ethical obligation. I then turn to Derrida's essay 'Violence and Metaphysics' where Derrida defends Heidegger against Levinas's criticisms. Derrida claims that, for Heidegger, the 'thought of being,' which is the essence philosophy, is not practical, and consequently that philosophy cannot supply an ethics in the sense of a framework for practical existence. Moreover, according to Derrida, if anything represented 'first philosophy' for Heidegger, it was the 'thinking of being' which motivated his entire philosophical corpus.

A note on scope

As I have indicated, this thesis addresses Levinas's work up to his major book *Totality and Infinity*. Levinas wrote a considerable number of books after that one, and to deal with them all would be beyond the scope of this thesis. Nonetheless, it is important to observe that in his most important philosophical work written after *Totality and Infinity*, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (1974), Levinas returns to the central arguments of *Totality and Infinity*

and radicalises the claims he advanced there.[2] For that reason, I take *Totality and Infinity* to represent a statement of Levinas's mature philosophical position.

Since Levinas's arguments against Heidegger draw primarily on Heidegger's position in *Being and Time* (1927), for the most part I limit my exposition of Heidegger to that text. In chapter three, however, I examine Heidegger's discussion of the relationship between ethics and philosophy in his later 'Letter on Humanism' (1947).

A note on translation

Following the Joan Stambaugh translation, I have rendered the central concept of Heidegger's *Being and Time* as 'Da-sein.' I have left quoted instances of 'Being' unchanged, but also following Stambaugh, in my own discussions I have used 'being' rather than 'Being' for Heidegger's *Sein*, trusting that the intended sense will be clear from the context. As Stambaugh observes, 'capitalising "being," although it has the dubious merit of treating "being" as something unique, risks implying that it is some kind of Super Thing or transcendent Being.'[3] The 'elevation' of being is a central issue in the Levinas-Heidegger debate.

All page references to *Being and Time* refer to the pagination of the 1953 Niemeyer edition of *Sein und Zeit*.

A note on gender-specific language

While the category of the other (*l'autrui*) does not refer to any particular other, Levinas and his translators have used masculine pronouns when referring to it in all the passages cited

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[2] See Adriaan T. Peperzak, 'Beyond Being,' *Research in Phenomenology* 8 (1978).
[3] Translator's Preface to Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh, 1927, (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1996), xiv.

in this thesis.[4] I have not altered these translations, and for the most part I have followed

the translators' practice in my own use of masculine pronouns to refer to the other.

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[4] There has been considerable scholarly discussion of Levinas's relationship to feminism. For an overview, see Stella Sandford, 'Levinas, Feminism and the Feminine,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, eds. Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

Being, existence, existents and

phenomenology: 1930-1947

This chapter traces the development of Levinas's philosophy during the period from his

doctoral dissertation (1930) to *Existence and Existents* (1947). In particular, it addresses the

shift in Levinas's relationship to the thought of Martin Heidegger during that period. The

two problems at the core of this exchange are, first, the nature of philosophical inquiry,

including the question of whether phenomenological ontology is the correct method for

such inquiry; and second, the question of what Heidegger calls the ontological distinction,

and what Levinas describes as the 'relation with being.'

Levinas's doctoral dissertation, published as *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*

(1930), reveals evidence of Heidegger's considerable influence on Levinas's early thought.

After his dissertation, Levinas's next published essay, 'Martin Heidegger and Ontology'

(1932), gave an admiring summary of Heidegger's *Being and Time* and was intended to form

the foundation for a lengthy study of Heidegger's thought. In both his doctoral

dissertation and that early essay, Levinas reveals a firm conviction that Heidegger's

philosophical method, that of phenomenological ontology, is the correct path for

philosophical investigation.[1] Shortly after those works, however, Levinas develops a more

critical approach to Heidegger. In *On Escape* (1934), Levinas begins to look for a 'path out

of being' which, while not entirely clear as a concept on its own, represented the beginning

of a fundamental challenge to Heidegger's thought. Then, in *Existence and Existents* (1947),

Levinas challenges Heidegger's conception of the relationship between being and beings.

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[1] Heidegger says that 'philosophy is universal phenomenological ontology' in Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 38.

Prior to the question of the relation between being and beings, however, is the question of the proper method of philosophical enquiry. Heidegger and Levinas both fall within the phenomenological tradition inaugurated by Husserl. According to Adriaan Peperzak's schema of the Husserl-Heidegger-Levinas sequence, Husserl began the phenomenological revolution in philosophy, Heidegger exploited the possibilities of phenomenology and transformed it into an ontology, and Levinas developed phenomenological ontology and attempted to overcome it through a 'radical renewal of "metaphysics," rehabilitating the existent [...] by a thought "beyond being."'[2] While Levinas's 'radical renewal of metaphysics' does not appeared as a fully-worked-out concept until his 1961 book *Totality and Infinity*, in works of the 1930s and 1940s up to his essay 'Is Ontology Fundamental?' (1951) Levinas increases his distance from Heidegger's fundamental-ontological project. Nonetheless, as Levinas notes in *Existence and Existents* (1947), his attempt to discover a way out of the climate of Heidegger's philosophy does not mistake itself for a search for a pre-Heideggerian philosophy.[3] With this claim, Levinas suggests that philosophical enquiry changed fundamentally after Heidegger. Given that Levinas's later thought largely rejects the project of fundamental ontology, what does the early Levinas consider to be Heidegger's contribution to philosophy? This chapter is addressed primarily to that question.

The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology (1930)

Levinas's doctoral dissertation on the philosophy of Husserl, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, was his earliest published work. After Levinas had spent the 1927-1928 academic year in Freiburg studying with Husserl and Heidegger, the dissertation was submitted in 1929 and published in Paris in 1930. In the following section, I shall not

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[2] Adriaan T. Peperzak, *Beyond: The Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*, (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1997), 38.; the idea of a good 'beyond being' appears in Plato's *Republic*, 509b.
[3] Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 4.

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attempt to show whether Levinas's interpretation of Husserl in this work is correct; rather, I shall argue that his interpretation shows evidence of having been shaped by Heidegger's influence. As Levinas recalled in an interview in 1982, 'the work that I did [...] on "the theory of intuition" in Husserl was [...] influenced by *Sein und Zeit*, to the extent that I sought to present Husserl as having perceived the ontological problem of being.'[4]

As Peperzak notes, Levinas treats Husserl's philosophy as at the same time a *theory of consciousness* and an *ontology*.[5] Levinas claims in the preface to *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology* that 'a method is never merely an instrument made to explore any part of reality' and that his project in that work is to show how 'the intuition which [Husserl] proposes as a mode of philosophising follows from his very conception of being.'[6] According to Levinas, Husserl gave us the 'possibility of passing from and through the theory of knowledge to the theory of being.'[7] 'Husserl's step forward beyond Descartes,' according to Levinas,

> consists in not separating the knowledge of an object – or, more generally, the mode
> of appearing of an object in our life – from its being; it consists of seeing the mode of
> its being known as the expression and the characteristic of its mode of being.[8]

Levinas's interpretation of Husserl can be broken down into a number of elements. First, according to Levinas, Husserl understood phenomenology not as the study of phenomena distinct from their essences, but the study of phenomena as the *available mode of presentation* of their essences. In this way, on Levinas's account, Husserl claims that the phenomenological approach charges us to investigate the 'meaning' of the existence of

[4] Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard A. Cohen, 1982, (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 39.
[5] Peperzak, *Beyond*, 41.
[6] Emmanuel Levinas, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, trans. André Orianne, Second ed., 1930, (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1995), xxxii.
[7] Levinas, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, 32.
[8] Levinas, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, 32.

phenomena as they are presented to us in the phenomenological reduction.[9] Second, according to Levinas, Husserl thinks that access to essences can be achieved because human consciousness is directed towards the world, and because our experience of the world is characterised by *intentionality*; indeed, 'intentionality is what makes up the very subjectivity of the subject.'[10] Intuition, as a kind of intentionality, is the mode of knowledge which 'reaches out' to objects. Third, intuition is not an unreliable, 'unobjective' form of knowledge but 'the act which claims to put us in contact with being and is the sole *locus* of truth.'[11]

Levinas's first claim about Husserl – that phenomenology gives access to the essence of phenomena – puts Husserl very close to Heidegger. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger says that the 'phenomenological concept of phenomenon, as self-showing, means the being of beings': phenomenological analysis of our experience of beings gives us access to their being.[12] Heidegger's ontological analysis of Da-sein takes him beyond Husserl's analysis of the modes of presentation of worldly phenomena to a description of Da-sein's modes of encountering beings (entities) as 'handy' (*zuhanden*) or 'objectively present' (*vorhanden*) for Da-sein, but insofar as, on Levinas's reading, Husserl's phenomenology gives us the being of beings, then his position is consonant with Heidegger's.

The second strand of Levinas's interpretation of Husserl is less obviously Heideggerian. According to Levinas, Husserl holds that intentionality, as an act of consciousness directed towards the world, is what constitutes us as subjects. Intuition does not feature in Heidegger's account of how we encounter entities in the world; instead, Heidegger offers the concept of being-in-the-world to describe our mode of encountering beings in the world. But just as Levinas's Husserl claims that intentionality is constitutive of subjectivity,

[9] Levinas, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, 122-131.
[10] Levinas, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, 41.
[11] Levinas, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, 153.
[12] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 35.

Heidegger claims that being-in-the-world is the 'fundamental constitution' of Da-sein.[13]

The mode of encountering the world is constitutive of subjectivity or Da-sein respectively.

On the third point, Husserl is again made to agree with Heidegger. For both Heidegger and Levinas's Husserl, truth is a mode of the revelation of the being of an entity. According to Levinas, Husserl claims that 'it is in [the] presence of consciousness to objects' that the 'primary phenomenon of truth lies.'[14] Indeed, for Levinas's Husserl, the 'primary phenomenon of truth [...] consists in facing being.'[15] As Heidegger argues,

> To say that a statement is *true* means that it discovers the beings in themselves. It asserts, it shows, it lets beings "be seen" (*apophansis*) in their discoveredness. The *being true* (*truth*) of the statement must be understood as *discovering*. Thus, truth by no means has the structure of an agreement between knowing and the object in the sense of a correspondence of one being (subject) and another (object).[16]

By pointing to the inadequacy of the traditional account of truth as a relation of correspondence, Heidegger hopes to show, as Hubert Dreyfus puts it, that 'truth cannot be an abstract, timeless relation of correspondence' between free-floating propositions and timeless, uninterpreted facts.[17] Both Heidegger and Levinas's Husserl reject the dominant account of truth which considers it 'the adequation' – a relationship of correspondence – of 'thought to things.'

Levinas's criticism of Husserl in *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl* also demonstrates the influence of Heidegger on his interpretation. Levinas's central charge against Husserl is that his account is 'intellectualist.' What does the charge of intellectualism mean for Levinas? There are two related elements in Levinas's accusation, which I shall set out briefly and then elaborate below. First, at the heart of the problem, is Husserl's goal of

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[13] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 52.
[14] Levinas, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, 88.
[15] Levinas, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, 89.
[16] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 218-219.
[17] Hubert L. Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time, Division I*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 278.

modelling philosophical inquiry on scientific inquiry. For Levinas, this misconceives the role of philosophy. Second, the 'suprahistorical attitude of theory' which the scientific model promotes leads Husserl to conceive of all our conscious life as theoretical. In turn, this theoretical, suprahistorical conception of consciousness leads Husserl to neglect the 'historical situation of man' and the 'historicity of consciousness.' In other words, Levinas's complaint is that Husserl's suprahistorical conception of consciousness — captured in the phenomenological reduction in which the philosopher 'neutralises' herself as a person living in the world — leads Husserl to neglect the historical and social nature of human existence.[18]

According to Levinas, Husserl conceived of philosophy as 'a universally valid science in the manner of geometry and the sciences of nature, as a science which is developed through the efforts of generations of scientists, each continuing the work of the others.'[19] As Levinas observes, Husserl's conception of philosophy does not entail that philosophy should borrowing the concepts of the sciences, but rather that it should model itself on them. Taking science as a model for philosophy, according to Levinas, is to say that 'the function, the role of philosophy, and the role of the sciences in our life, are of the same type; that philosophy occupies the same place in the metaphysical destiny of man' as the sciences.[20] Levinas's criticism is that in Husserl's conception, 'philosophy seems as independent of the historical situation of man as any theory that tries to consider everything *sub specie aeternitatis*.'[21]

Levinas's mention of the 'historical situation of man' here is not meant to suggest that humankind's fundamental nature will change over time so that science which is valid at one time will not be valid at another. Levinas, following Heidegger, insists that the subject (or

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[18] Levinas, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, 157.
[19] Levinas, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, 155.
[20] Levinas, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, 155.
[21] Levinas, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, 155.

Da-sein) is fundamentally historical and temporal. For Levinas, human life has a historical character in the sense that is captured by the phrase 'all persons have a history.' 'It is through this *sui generis* phenomenon in the constitution of a personality,' according to Levinas, 'that man has a specific manner of being his past that is inconceivable in the case of a stone.'[22] Moreover, this historicity – this condition of 'being our past' – is a primary property of humankind: 'Historicity and temporality form the very substantiality of man's substance.'[23]

Levinas claims that for Husserl, consciousness is primarily theoretical, which means that it is first of all reflective and contemplative. For Husserl, philosophy begins with the reduction. According to Levinas, the reduction 'is an act in which we consider life in all its concreteness but no longer live it.'[24] Levinas asks:

> Is our main attitude toward reality that of theoretical contemplation? Is not the world presented in its very being as a centre of action, as a field of activity or of *care* – to speak the language of Martin Heidegger?[25]

For Levinas, Heidegger's contribution is to challenge Husserl's notion of the primacy of theoretical consciousness and to insist instead that Da-sein is primordially historical and social. According to Levinas, Husserl neglects the historicity of humankind's substance: at least in his work published up to that date (1929), Levinas claims that Husserl 'never discusses the relation between the historicity of consciousness and its intentionality, its personality, its social character.'[26]

Levinas claims that the absence of this aspect of consciousness in Husserl's work is explained by 'the general spirit of his thought,' because the 'historicity of consciousness

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[22] Levinas, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, 156.
[23] Levinas, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, 156.
[24] Levinas, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, 155.
[25] Levinas, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, 119.
[26] Levinas, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, 156.

does not appear as an original phenomenon, because the suprahistorical attitude of theory supports [...] all our conscious life.' The intellectualist position fails to ask how the 'neutralisation' of life that occurs in the phenomenological reduction 'has its foundation in life: 'How does man in the naïve attitude, immersed in the world, the "born dogmatic," suddenly become aware of his naïveté?'[27] Positing representation as the basis of consciousness 'undermines the historicity of consciousness' and gives intuition the 'intellectualist character' that Levinas complains of.[28] Like Heidegger, Levinas insists here on the fundamental historicity and temporality of Da-sein: Levinas says that historicity and temporality 'form the very substantiality of man's substance;' for Heidegger, Da-sein is 'rooted' in temporality, and 'Da-sein "is" its past in the manner of *its* being.'[29]

On Levinas's account, Husserl's hope that philosophy would become a rigorous science has not been realised. Indeed, as Levinas says in a later essay, 'it is very likely that philosophy resists this mode of spiritual life.'[30] Nonetheless, as Colin Davis notes, Husserl offered Levinas a method of philosophical investigation which relied neither on dogmatic assertion nor on unsystematic intuition.[31] Indeed, for Levinas, Husserl provided 'the concrete meaning of the very possibility of "working in philosophy."'[32] Nonetheless, as Peperzak notes, both Levinas's hermeneutic method – 'based on the supposition that philosophy is a specific practice and mode of being rooted in concrete existence' – and his specific criticisms of Husserl are inspired by Heidegger.[33] In his later essay 'Signature' (1970), Levinas acknowledges that Heidegger's achievement is to take Husserl's phenomenological method and direct it towards the fundamental 'condition' for all entities,

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[27] Levinas, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, 157.
[28] Levinas, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, 157.
[29] Levinas, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, 156; Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 351, 20, emphasis in original.
[30] Emmanuel Levinas, 'Reflections on Phenomenological "Technique",' trans. Richard A. Cohen and Michael B. Smith, in *Discovering Existence with Husserl* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 91.
[31] Colin Davis, *Levinas: An Introduction*, (Cambridge: Polity, 1996), 8.
[32] Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 28.
[33] Peperzak, *Beyond*, 44.

their being.[34]

'Martin Heidegger and Ontology' (1932)

Heidegger's inspirational effect on Levinas during this period is also clear in Levinas's 1932 essay 'Martin Heidegger and Ontology.' This essay offers an admiring recapitulation of key themes of Heidegger's *Being and Time*, and according to Jacques Rolland, it represents the 'first substantial study in French' of Heidegger's work.[35] Levinas observes in a footnote that it was intended to be part of book on Heidegger, but this project was abandoned after Heidegger's public commitment to National Socialism in 1933.[36] In this essay, however, Levinas's approach to Heidegger's project of fundamental ontology is sympathetic, and it reflects the endorsement of Heidegger's work that he offered in his dissertation.

Levinas gives a careful exposition of Heidegger's work in this essay, and he praises the originality and forcefulness of Heidegger's analysis: 'anyone who has studied philosophy,' he says, 'cannot, when confronted by Heidegger's work, fail to recognise how the originality and force of his achievements, stemming from genius, are combined with an attentive, painstaking, and close working-out of the argument.'[37] While there are no explicit criticisms of Heidegger in this essay, it does reveal Levinas's early attention to the concept of being-in-the-world. Levinas draws attention to the necessary connection between the question of being and the analytic of Da-sein, and emphasises that Heidegger devotes a considerable part of *Being and Time* to the analytic of 'fallen Da-sein plunged into "everyday

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[34] Emmanuel Levinas, 'Signature,' trans. Seán Hand, in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism* (London: The Athlone Press, 1990), 292.
[35] Jacques Rolland, 'Getting Out of Being by a New Path,' trans. Bettina Bergo, in *On Escape* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2003), 7.
[36] Simon Critchley, 'Introduction,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, eds. Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 8.
[37] Emmanuel Levinas, 'Martin Heidegger and Ontology,' *Diacritics* 26.1 (1996): 11.

life.'"[38]

On Escape (1936)

On Escape represents a change in the direction of Levinas's thought and in his relation to

Heidegger. While the ideas presented in this work are not fully worked out, it does, as

Rolland notes, introduce a new 'space of questioning' within which Levinas's investigation

subsequently proceeds.[39] As Levinas notes in the preface to the second French edition of

his 1947 work *Existence and Existents*, his philosophy 'remained faithful to [*On Escape*'s]

finality, even if it varied in its terminology, its formulas, its operative concepts and certain

of its theses.'[40]

'Escape' in this text refers to a desire to escape being.[41] Heidegger's project is to think

being through an analysis of the being of Da-sein, and until this point, Levinas has adopted

entirely Heidegger's conception of philosophy: as he expressed it in 'Martin Heidegger and

Ontology,' 'the search for meaning, *ontology*, is philosophy itself.'[42] Philosophy's concern,

Levinas agreed, was to uncover the meaning of being through the existential analysis of

Da-sein. In *On Escape*, however, Levinas seeks to 'renew the ancient problem of being qua

being.'[43] For the Levinas of *On Escape*, the task of philosophy is to ask:

> What is the structure of this pure being? Does it have the universality Aristotle
> conferred on it? Is it the ground and limit of our preoccupations, as certain modern
> philosophers would have it? On the contrary, is it nothing else than the mark of a
> certain civilisation, firmly established in the fait accompli of being and incapable of
> getting out of it? And, in these conditions, is *excendence* [escape from being] possible,
> and how would it be accomplished? What is the ideal of happiness and human dignity

[38] Levinas, 'Martin Heidegger and Ontology,' 26.
[39] Rolland, 'Getting Out of Being by a New Path,' 4.
[40] Noted in Rolland, 'Getting Out of Being by a New Path,' 4.
[41] In other translations, *l'évasion* is rendered as 'evasion.'
[42] Levinas, 'Martin Heidegger et l'ontologie,' *Revue Philosophique*, 414.
[43] Emmanuel Levinas, *On Escape*, trans. Bettina Bergo, 1936, (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2003), 56.

that it promises?[44]

Heidegger is the first of these 'modern philosophers' from whom Levinas wants to distance himself insofar as they see in being 'the ground and limit of our preoccupations.'[45] Heidegger was certainly explicitly concerned to 'retrieve' the question of being.[46] What was inadequate about his attempt? According to Levinas, Heidegger's renewal of the question of being was insufficiently radical because it failed to think 'being qua being,' 'pure' or 'abstract' being. Levinas supplements the concept of *transcendence*, which is a better or worse way of describing the encountering the world in Husserl and Heidegger, with the idea of *excendence*, the desire for an escape from being.

According to Levinas, we stand in a relation to existence. This relationship between the self and (its) being is manifested particularly in certain states, and in *On Escape* he analyses the phenomena of desire-for-escape (which he calls 'excendence'), laziness, fatigue and insomnia for the insights that they give into the structure of this relationship. Levinas's early works offers evocative phenomenological accounts of what he sometimes calls 'states of the soul' which are prefigured by Heidegger's analyses of angst and fear in *Being and Time*. As Simon Critchley puts it, 'Levinas is concerned with trying to excavate the pre-theoretical layers of our intentional comportment towards the world, an archaeology of the pre-reflective constitution of existence.'[47] In this case, the phenomena of excendence, laziness, fatigue and insomnia are interpreted by Levinas 'attempts to escape from existence, to flee from one's own being.' Our longing for escape shows us the nature of our relation with being. Existence entails suffering, but the suffering that it entails is different from the trials of daily life. Rather, 'the ground of suffering consists of the

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[44] Levinas, *On Escape*, 56.

[45] Jacques Rolland, 'Annotations,' trans. Bettina Bergo, in *On Escape* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2003), Annotation no.3.

[46] Section 1 of the Introduction to *Being and Time* is titled 'The Necessity of an Explicit Retrieve of the Question of Being.'

[47] Simon Critchley, 'Emmanuel Levinas (1905-1996),' *Radical Philosophy* (1996).

impossibility of interrupting it, of an acute feeling of being held fast [*rivé*, riveted]': 'what counts [...] in all this experience of being is the discovery [...] of its very fact, of the permanent quality [*inamovibilité*] itself of our presence.'[48]

What do the notions of escape or pure being or being qua being refer to for Levinas? These concepts remain underdeveloped in this work. The term 'escape' refers to 'world-weariness, the disorder of our time [*mal du siècle*].'[49] As Rolland notes, the renewal of the question of being begins with human existing 'becoming aware of its own existence, of the very fact of this existence, and of the irrevocable quality of its presence.'[50] Levinas says that escape 'is the need to get out of oneself, that is, *to break that most radical and unalterably binding of chains, the fact that the I [moi] is oneself [soi-même]*.'[51] As Rolland notes, 'what lies hidden in this metaphor [of escape] is the urgent requirement of a thinking beyond being, understood in its verbal sense, a requirement that will not find adequate philosophical expression until the counter-concept of "otherwise than being" is forged' in Levinas's 1974 work *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*.[52]

'Ontology within the Temporal' (1940)

Levinas's 1940 essay 'Ontology within the Temporal' represents an important shift in Levinas's reading of *Being and Time*.[53] Jacques Taminiaux observes that unlike Levinas's contemporaries, who thought that Heidegger's 1927 text was 'an anthropology full of pathos,' Levinas saw that the ontological problem was the only one that interested Heidegger, and that he treated human being only insofar is it would illuminate the question

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[48] Levinas, *On Escape*, 52.
[49] Levinas, *On Escape*, 52.
[50] Rolland, 'Getting Out of Being by a New Path,' 12.
[51] Levinas, *On Escape*, 55, emphasis in original.
[52] Rolland, 'Getting Out of Being by a New Path,' 6; Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, 1974, (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 1998).
[53] Emmanuel Levinas, 'L'ontologie dans le temporel,' in *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1974).

'what is it to be?'[54] In this essay, Taminiaux detects 'the firm, though discrete, anticipation of the criticism articulated in [Levinas's] first essays published after the war [*Existence and Existents* and *Time and the Other*] and later more fully elaborated in *Totality and Infinity*.'[55]

In this essay Levinas gives an encapsulated description of the critique of Heidegger that he will develop in subsequent works:

> By raising the ontological problem, [Heidegger] subordinates ontic truth, which is directed toward the other, to the ontological question, which is an issue within the self, within the 'oneself' who by their existence has a relation with the being which is their own. That relation with being is the truly original interiority. In this way, Heidegger's philosophy is an attempt to posit the person – as the site of the comprehension of being. [In being-towards-death,] the person discovers the nothingness upon which they stand, which also means that they do not rest on anything other than themselves.[56]

In this paragraph, Levinas announces the claim that will become the target of much of his subsequent work: Heidegger here asserts the primacy of the relation with being – which is a relationship of comprehension and of what Heidegger calls 'mineness' (*Jemeinigkeit*) – over the relation with the other.

Existence and Existents (1947)

In the preface to *Existence and Existents*, Levinas gives a clear indication of his intention to overcome Heidegger's philosophy: he asserts that his reflections in that work are 'governed by a profound need to leave the climate of [Heidegger's] philosophy.' But at the same time, Levinas is inspired 'by the conviction that we cannot leave it for a philosophy that would be pre-Heideggerian.'[57] Levinas's short book *Existence and Existents* and his series of

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[54] Jacques Taminiaux, 'The Early Levinas's Reply to Heidegger's Fundamental Ontology,' *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 23.6 (1997): 29.

[55] Taminiaux, 'Levinas's reply to Heidegger,' 29.

[56] Levinas, 'L'ontologie dans le temporel,' 89, my translation.

[57] Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 4.

lectures published as *Time and the Other* (also 1947) offer a response to Heidegger's inquiry into fundamental ontology that suggests the outline of a philosophical project which will differ profoundly from Heidegger's. As Peperzak observes, Levinas's criticisms of Heidegger in these works are mostly implicit.[58] Nonetheless, Levinas advances claims in these texts which constitute real disagreements with Heidegger, and the purpose of the remainder of this chapter and the first part of the following chapter is to uncover those direct challenges to Heidegger.

As Robert Bernasconi notes in his foreword to the English translation of *Existence and Existents*, in 1947 Levinas already understands his project in this work in terms of an attempt to detach being from its dependence on beings in order to examine the nature of 'transcendence' and (in Plato's phrase) 'the good beyond being,' which emerge as key concepts in his later works.[59] *Existence and Existents*, however, is a developmental work. The ideas for which Levinas is best known, the idea of a relation with alterity and the ethical demand of the face of the other, are only nascent here, and the latter thought does not appear explicitly until his 1951 essay 'Is Ontology Fundamental?'.[60]

What does Levinas mean by the terms 'existence' and 'existent'? He says in the contemporary work *Time and the Other* that he refers to existence and existents in favour of being (*Sein*) and beings (*Seiendes*) 'for reasons of euphony.'[61] But for the purposes of relating Levinas's position with Heidegger's, I shall take Levinas's terms *existence* and *existents* to correspond with Heidegger's notions of *being* and *beings* (or *entities*) respectively.

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[58] Peperzak, *Beyond*, 49.

[59] Robert Bernasconi, 'Foreword,' in *Existence and Existents* (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 2001), xi.

[60] Emmanuel Levinas, 'Is Ontology Fundamental?,' in *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings*, eds. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1996).

[61] Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard Cohen, 1947, (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 44.

The position presented in *Existence and Existents* differs from Heidegger's on three points which I shall set out briefly and then elaborate below. First, Levinas contradicts one of Heidegger's fundamental contentions about being. Heidegger's claim is that being is always the being of a being.[62] In particular, he denies that being – such as the being to which Da-sein is primordially related, which he calls *Existenz* – can be defined by giving a 'what' that specifies its content.[63] On Levinas's account, however, there is being *independent of* beings. He calls this being the *il y a*, or the 'there is.' Second, Levinas seems to imply that Heidegger is making a claim about humankind's concrete concern for being and its aversion to death. As Bernasconi notes in his foreword to *Existence and Existents*, Levinas, like Adorno, took Heidegger to claim that human being is concerned about its own being, 'thereby implying that Heidegger was in some way associated with Social Darwinism.'[64] I discuss Levinas's treatment of death and Heidegger's concept of being-toward-death below. Third, Levinas's account contradicts what Heidegger refers to in his argument about temporality as the ontological meaning of care as the ek-stasis of temporality.'[65] According to Heidegger, the fact that we relate to the past, the present and the future is an essential or primordial aspect of the being of Da-sein. On his view, the meaning of Da-sein's being is that it exists ecstatically – in other words, outside of itself in time – and that this represents its mode of relating to its own being. Against Heidegger's ek-stasis, Levinas introduces the concept of hypostasis, which he uses to refer to the idea of existence appearing as a burden to be taken up; the analysis of this phenomenon, says Levinas, reveals human being's special relation to the instant which differs from Heidegger's explication of ek-stasis. In the following sections I shall elaborate these disagreements and address their relationship to Levinas's broader philosophical project.

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[62] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 9. In other translations, this formulation appears as 'Being is always the Being of an entity.'
[63] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 12.
[64] Bernasconi, 'Foreword,' xii.
[65] 'Ecstasies' appears as 'ecstases' or 'ek-stasis' in other translations. I follow the Stambaugh translation here.

Before turning to these points of disagreement, it is worth recalling some of the basic claims of Heidegger's position in *Being and Time* in order to make clear the targets of Levinas's argument. What is the project of *Being and Time*? The central question of *Being and Time* — 'What is the meaning of being?' — is not addressed as an abstract problem. Instead, Heidegger preliminary step is to analyse Da-sein, or human being, in order to approach that fundamental question. Why is Da-sein a candidate for such an interrogation? According to Heidegger, Da-sein is a being whose being is an issue for it, and Da-sein has a relationship of *understanding* towards being. Because 'understanding of being is itself a determination of the being of Da-sein,' then 'fundamental ontology [...] must be sought in the existential analysis of Da-sein.'[66]

Distinguishing being from beings

According to Levinas, the distinction between

> that which exists and its existence itself, between [...] individual beings designated by substantives and the event or act of their existence, imposes itself upon philosophical reflection — and with equal facility disappears from its view. It is as though thought becomes dizzy pouring over the emptiness of the very to exist, which we seem not to be able to say anything about, which only becomes intelligible in its participle, the existent, that which exists. Thought slips imperceptibly from the notion of being qua being, that by virtue of which an existing being exists, to the idea of a cause of existence, a "being in general," [...] and not the deed, activity, pure event or work, of being. This latter will be understood in confusion with beings.[67]

By implication, Heidegger's error is to understand 'the deed, activity, pure event or work of being,' 'in confusion with beings.'[68] Is Heidegger guilty of the confusion that Levinas attributes to him? As we have seen, Heidegger claims that being is always the being of a

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[66] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 12,13.
[67] Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 1.
[68] Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 1.

being.[69] Being is not a being in the sense of *phainomenon*, something which shows itself. The ground of beings does not appear as a being itself.[70] For this reason, for Heidegger, the question of the meaning of being involves inquiry into the being of particular beings. Heidegger takes Da-sein, or human being, as the starting-point of his inquiry because Da-sein, in its essence, always already holds a kind of preliminary or guiding appreciation of being. Levinas's project in *Existence and Existents*, however, is give to an account of *being in general.*

For Levinas, thinking *being* without *beings* is simultaneously necessary and difficult: as we have just seen, he thinks that 'the distinction between that which exists and its existence itself [...] imposes itself on philosophical reflection – and with equal facility disappears from its view.'[71] Indeed, Levinas admits thinking about the verb 'to exist' is dizzying, and separating being and beings means dealing with slippery concepts. But the fact that being and beings are difficult to distinguish satisfactorily is not accidental; rather, Levinas thinks that it is 'due to the habit of situating the instant, the atom of time, outside of any event.'[72] Crucially, according to Levinas, our relationship with the fact that there is being constitutes a disquieting *event.* Levinas asks: 'Does not being in general become the being of "a being" by an inversion, by that event which is the present?'[73] According to Levinas, 'a being, a subject, an existent, arises in impersonal being' through an event he calls a 'hypostasis.'[74] The question that Levinas addresses in *Existence and Existents* is: what is 'the event of being, being in general, detached from beings which dominate it?'[75]

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[69] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 9. In other translations, this formulation appears as 'Being is always the Being of an entity.'

[70] See Bettina Bergo, *Levinas Between Ethics and Politics: For the Beauty that Adorns the Earth*, (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1999), 43-45.

[71] Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 1.

[72] Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 1.

[73] Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 3.

[74] Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 3. Levinas's use of this term is discussed in a translator's footnote in *Time and the Other*. Translated literally, it means 'standing under.' See Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 43-44.

[75] Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 2.

In this work, then, Levinas seeks to approach *being in general* 'in its impersonality.'[76] How does Levinas approach the idea of being in general? As Bernasconi suggests, the themes addressed here are in some ways provoked by the author's sense of hopelessness and despair at the time of writing. Written during Levinas's imprisonment in the Second World War, Levinas's analysis begins with the claim that the hyperbolic expressions of the time, such as 'a world in pieces' or 'a world turned upside down,' convey an authentic feeling. 'Stripped of mythological overtones,' Levinas says, such concerns represent 'the moment of a limit' and consequently are 'singularly instructive.'[77] Levinas interprets these situations as interruptions of 'the continual play of our relations with the world,' where we find 'neither death' (Heidegger) 'nor the "pure ego"' (Husserl), 'but the anonymous state of being.' Indeed, 'in the situation of an end of the world the primary relationship which binds us to being becomes palpable.'[78]

As well as being provoked by the prevailing feelings of disruption, Levinas's assertion of the concept of being in general is also provoked by his reaction to Heidegger's renewed inquiry into ontology. For Levinas, ontological investigation

> affirms that what is essential in human spirituality does not lie in our relationship with the things which make up the world, but is determined by a relationship, effected in our very existence, with the pure fact that there is being.[79]

The 'there is' (*il y a*)

As we have seen, Levinas attempts to describe being which is independent of beings. He calls this being the *il y a*, which is usually translated as the 'there is'.[80] While *Existence and Existents* represents Levinas's earliest attempts to think the 'there is' or 'existence without

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[76] Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 3.
[77] Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 7-8.
[78] Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 8.
[79] Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 3.
[80] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 9.

existents, that concept is given surprisingly little direct elaboration. Instead, Levinas proceeds by attempting to evoke experiences of it. In a thought-experiment where he imagines 'all beings, things and persons, reverting to nothingness,' he says:

> When the form of things are dissolved in the night, the darkness of the night, which is neither an object nor the quality of an object, invades it like a presence. In the night, where we are riveted to it, we are not dealing with anything. But this nothing is not that of pure nothingness. There is no longer *this* or *that*; there is not "something." But this universal absence is in its turn a presence, an absolutely unavoidable presence. It is not the dialectical counterpart of absence, and we do not grasp it through a thought. It is immediately there. [...] *There is*, in general, without it mattering what there is, without our being able to fix a substantive to this term. *There is* is an impersonal form, like in it rains, or it is warm.[81]

When we experience the 'there is',

> What we call the I is itself submerged by the night, invaded, depersonalised, stifled by it. The disappearance of all things and of the I leaves what cannot disappear, the sheer fact of being in which *one* participates, whether one wants to or not, without having taken the initiative, anonymously. Being remains, like a field of forces, like a heavy atmosphere belonging to no one, universal, returning in the midst of the negation which put it aside, and in all the powers to which that negation may be multiplied.[82]

In a 1982 interview, Levinas recounts how his reflection on the phenomenon of the 'there is' or 'impersonal being' began with childhood memories of going to bed while his parents were still awake:

> E.L.: One sleeps alone, the adults continue life; the child feels the silence of his bedroom as "rumbling."
>
> Ph.N.: A rumbling silence?
>
> E.L.: It is something resembling what one hears when one puts an empty shell close to the ear, as if the emptiness was full, as if the silence were a noise. It is something one

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[81] Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 52-53.
[82] Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 53.

can also feel when one thinks that even if there were nothing, the fact that "there is" is undeniable. Not that there is this or that; but the very scene of being is open: there is. In the absolute emptiness that one can imagine before creation – there is.[83]

He notes in that interview that *Existence and Existents* tries to describe the 'there is', and describes it as 'horror and panic.'[84] But even without humans, being, or the 'there is', remains. Does this claim constitute a real objection to Heidegger? The targets of Levinas's claim that there is existence without existents (or being without beings) are Heidegger's claim that being is always the being of a being, and that Da-sein's relation to being is one of mineness. I shall treat this claim in the following section.

Concern for being

As Bernasconi observes, Levinas, like Adorno, takes Heidegger's claim that Da-sein is concerned with being to mean that Da-sein fears for its life.[85] In an interview in 1988, Levinas says:

> A being is something that is attached to being, to its own being. That is Darwin's idea. [...] It is a question of might. Heidegger says at the beginning of *Being and Time* that Da-sein is a being who in his being is concerned for this being itself. That's Darwin's idea: the living being struggles for life. The aim of being is being itself.[86]

This aspect of Levinas's interpretation of Heidegger arises in part from his reading of Heidegger's ontological analysis of anxiety. Thinking of Heidegger's concept of *Angst*, Levinas argues that a conception of being relies entirely on us already having an understanding of nothingness:

> Anxiety, a comprehension of nothingness, is a comprehension of being only inasmuch
> as being itself is determined by nothingness. A being without anxiety would be an

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[83] Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 48.
[84] Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 49.
[85] Bernasconi, 'Foreword,' xi-xii.
[86] Tamra Wright, Peter Hughes and Alison Ainley, 'The Paradox of Morality: an Interview with Emmanuel Levinas,' trans. Andrew Benjamin and Tamra Wright, in *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other*, eds. Robert Bernasconi and David Wood (London: Routledge, 1988), 172.

infinite being – but that concept is self-contradictory. The dialectic of being and nothingness continues to dominate Heideggerian ontology.[87]

Levinas likens Heideggerian anxiety to a fear of *nothingness*, and opposes it to a fear of being, the 'horror of the night' that is the experience of the 'there is'. Levinas suggests that while Heidegger's investigation of ontology and 'the relation man sustains with being' is important, there are aspects of it which must be overcome:

> The concept which appears to preside over the Heideggerian interpretation of human existence is that of existence conceived as ecstasy – which is only possible as an ecstasy *toward the end*. It consequently situates the tragic element in existence in this finitude and in the nothingness into which man is thrown insofar as he exists.[88]

How does Heidegger conceive of existence as ecstasy? In Division Two of *Being and Time*, Heidegger discusses what he calls the 'ecstasies of temporality' in order to describe the 'ontological meaning of care.'[89] Temporality, for Heidegger, is that which makes possible the unified being-as-a-whole. Captured in a single phrase, temporality is 'the unified phenomenon of the future that makes present in the process of having-been.'[90] The ecstasies (disruptions) of temporality named by Heidegger are the phenomena of *future*, *having been*, and *present*.[91] These temporal phenomena demonstrate how care, involving being-for or being-toward, is Da-sein's primary mode of being-in-the-world.

Levinas suggests that anxiety about being is as fundamental as anxiety about not-being, or death. On Levinas's reading, fear *for* being is an essential part of Heidegger's understanding of Da-sein:

> Is not anxiety over being – horror of being – just as primal as anxiety over death? Is not the fear of being just as originary as the fear for being? It is perhaps even more

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[87] Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 4.
[88] Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 4, emphasis in original
[89] Heidegger, *Being and Time.*, II.III, section 65.
[90] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 326.
[91] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 329.

so, for the former may account for the latter. [92]

As Levinas argues in his earlier essay 'Ontology Within the Temporal,' in Heidegger's conception *Angst* is not directed towards a particular worldly being, but towards nothingness; moreover, it reveals the insignificance of everything in the world, including Da-sein.[93]

What does Heidegger say about the relationship between being, death and *Angst?* According to him, death is a possibility of being that Da-sein always has to take upon itself.[94] In *Angst* about death, according to Heidegger, Da-sein is 'brought before itself.'[95] He argues that 'being-toward-death is essentially *Angst*,' but it is 'not only *Angst* and certainly not *Angst* as a mere emotion.'[96] Indeed, *Angst* is not a cowardly fear; rather, 'the they distort this *Angst* into the fear of a future event.'[97]

Having posited in Heidegger's analysis of *Angst* the notion of an originary fear for being, Levinas insists on the fearsomeness of the 'there is', the 'general state of existence' of which being and nothingness are 'phases':

> Are not being and nothingness, which, in Heidegger's philosophy, are equivalent or coordinated, not rather phases of a more general state of existence, which is nowise constituted by nothingness? We shall call it the fact that *there is*.[98]

For Levinas, there is a strong link between the 'rumbling' of the 'there is' and fear of death. According to Levinas,

> It is because the 'there is' has such a complete hold on us that we cannot take nothingness and death lightly, and we tremble before them. The fear of nothingness is but the measure of our involvement in being. Existence of itself harbours

[92] Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 5.
[93] Levinas, 'L'ontologie dans le temporel,' 84-85.
[94] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 250.
[95] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 254.
[96] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 266 and footnote.
[97] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 254.
[98] Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 5.

something tragic which is not only there because of its finitude. Something that death cannot resolve.[99]

Taking up being: 'hypostasis' and 'position'

As we have seen, Levinas thinks that Heidegger's analysis of Da-sein in *Being and Time* is shaped fundamentally by his analysis of being-toward-the-end, or being-toward-death. Levinas's argument here is prompted in part by Heidegger's claim that care is being-towards-death or being-toward-the-end.[100] For Levinas, however, being is something we 'take up.' Levinas argues that the relation of being to beings is not that of something given, but of something to be achieved, or to be gained through a kind of 'contract.'

As we have seen, Heidegger thinks that being is always the being of a being. Moreover, he says that Da-sein has 'ontological priority' because it already has an understanding of being, and because Da-sein is a being that is concerned with its being.[101] Heidegger uses the term Da-sein to capture human being's special mode of relating to existence. Heidegger says:

> We shall call the very being to which Da-sein can relate in one way or another, and somehow always does relate, existence [*Existenz*]. And because the essential definition of this being cannot be accomplished by ascribing to it a "what" that specifies its material content, because its essence lies rather in the fact that it in each instance has to be its being as its own, the term Da-sein, as a pure expression of being, has been chosen to designate this being.
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> Da-sein always understands itself in terms of its existence.[102]

For Heidegger, Da-sein has a relation with being, which he describes as a relation of mineness (*Jemeinigkeit*).[103] Heidegger's claim that we have a primordial relationship with being also appears in his account of 'modes of attunement' (*Befindlichkeit*). Modes of

[99] Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 5.
[100] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 329.
[101] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 12-13.
[102] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 12.
[103] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 41.

attunement such as fear and anxiety, which are usually described as moods, are ontologically important according to Heidegger because they operate in a manner of 'originary transcendence,' inescapably opening up certain ways of seeing the world and closing off others. They disclose Da-sein 'in a primordial sense.'[104] The ontological characteristics of Da-sein revealed through an analysis of moods, which according to Heidegger are existentiality, facticity, and falling prey, reveal the structure of Da-sein's being. In this way, moods reveal the relationship we have with being.

Levinas, on the other hand, thinks that our relationship with being is not something primordial that can be revealed through ontological analysis, but that it appears in other phenomena, and is best described as a process of *taking up* in a kind of contract. He calls this process of taking up 'hypostasis' (*l'hypostase*). Levinas's approach in much of *Existence and Existents* is to examine phenomenologically certain human states – fatigue, insomnia, effort, laziness – in order to see how they reveal how being is taken up. The common element of these states is the fact that they show a special relation to the *instant*.

Existence and Existents is also important for Levinas's development of the concept of 'position,' which is 'that condition or basis from which the subject posits itself,' in Bernasconi's words.[105] Levinas offers this argument against Heidegger's idea of the originary thrownness and ecstatic character of Da-sein. Bernasconi suggests that the French title, better translated as 'From Existence to the Existent,' captures the 'movement whereby the human subject arises in being by taking a position.'[106] What does it mean for a subject to arise in being by taking a position? I attempt to elucidate Levinas's answer to this question in the following section.

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[104] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 190.
[105] Bernasconi, 'Foreword,' xii.
[106] Bernasconi, 'Foreword,' xii.

Fatigue, indolence and effort

In *Existence and Existents*, Levinas attempts to reveal hypostasis through a phenomenological analysis of fatigue and effort. His analyses purport to show that the human subject is not given, but arises in taking up being.[107] While Levinas and Heidegger both focus on the relationship between being and beings, Levinas does not assume, as Heidegger does, that the relation is 'always already' given.

According to Levinas, the relationship between self and its existence, and the appearance of existence as 'a burden to be taken up,' become preoccupations under circumstances of fatigue and indolence. These are good candidates for analysis, he claims, because our preoccupation with the relationship between self and its existence become particularly acute in such cases.[108]

What does a phenomenological analysis of these situations show? According to Levinas's examination, fatigue and indolence are 'positions taken with regard to existence.'[109] They are a 'non-acceptance,' a 'recoil before existence' – indeed, 'their whole reality is made up of that refusal.' In weariness 'we want to escape existence itself;' it is 'an evasion without an itinerary and without an end.'[110] Fatigue is 'an impossibility of following through, a constant and increasing lag between being and what it remains attached to.'[111] As such, it is a 'condemnation to being.'[112]

> [I]n weariness existence is like the reminder of a commitment to exist, with all the seriousness and harshness of an unrevocable contract. [T]he obligation of this contract remains incumbent on us like an inevitable 'one must.' It animates the need to act and to undertake, and makes that necessity poignant. Weariness is the

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[107] Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 3.
[108] Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 4.
[109] Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 11.
[110] Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 12.
[111] Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 18.
[112] Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 24.

impossible refusal of this ultimate obligation.   In weariness we want to escape existence itself. ... An evasion without an itinerary and without an end, it is not trying to come ashore somewhere. Like for Baudelaire's true travellers, it is a matter of parting for the sake of parting.[113]

Indolence is 'the impossibility of beginning.'[114]

What fatigue apprehends and abhors in the very exercise of existence, what it impotently declines to shoulder, indolence refuses in refusing to shoulder its existence.[115]

What does this analysis show us? Fatigue shows us how the 'present' is constituted as a kind of 'lag':

In the simplicity, unity and obscurity of fatigue, it is like the lag of an existent that is tarrying behind its existing. And this lag constitutes the present. Because of this distance in existence, existence is a relationship between *an* existent and itself.[116]

If the present is thus constituted by the taking charge of the present, if the time-lag of fatigue creates the interval in which the present can occur, and if this event is equivalent to the upsurge of an *existent* for which *to be* means *to take up being*, the existence of an existent is by essence an activity.[117]

In this way, these phenomena show us how 'a being, a subject, an existent, arises in impersonal Being, though a hypostasis.'[118] Action is the taking-up of existence:

To act is to take on a present. This does not amount to repeating that the present is the actual, but it signifies that the present is the apparition, in the anonymous rumbling of existence, which is at grips with this existence, in relationship with it, takes it up. Action is this taking up. Action is then by essence subjection and servitude, but also the first manifestation, or the very constitution, of an existent, a *someone* that is.[119]

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[113] Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 12.
[114] Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 13.
[115] Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 17.
[116] Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 24-25, emphasis in original.
[117] Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 25.
[118] Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 3.
[119] Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 23.

In this way, the phenomena of fatigue and indolence represent, in Edith Wyschogrod's words, 'attempts to avoid the imperatives which existence imposes,' and Levinas's analysis of them reveals pure being as something to be taken on.[120] Heidegger's error in this respect, according to Levinas, was to understand Da-sein's being in terms of our relation with things which go to make up the world.

> In the effort to separate the notion of the world from the notion of a sum of objects, we certainly see one of the most profound discoveries of Heideggerian philosophy. But in order to describe being-in-the-world, this German philosopher has appealed to an ontological finality, to which he subordinates objects in the world. Seeing objects as "material" – in the sense that we speak of "war material" – he has included them in the care for existing, which for him is the very putting of the ontological problem. [...] Not everything that is given in the world is a tool.[121]

Instead, human subjectivity is based on a relation with the bare fact that there is being.

In this chapter, I have addressed the development of Levinas's thought and its relationship to the thought of Heidegger up to Levinas's 1947 work, *Existence and Existents*, where we have seen evidence of a considerable shift away from Heidegger and towards the notion of a being independent of beings. Nonetheless, in these texts Levinas persists with a conception of philosophy which is strongly influenced by Heidegger, and Levinas's terminology, such as *excendence* and the *il y a* remain at bottom ontological concepts. In the following chapter, I shall continue my account of Levinas's engagement with Heidegger in a lecture series from 1947, published as *Time and the Other*, and the article 'Is Ontology Fundamental?' (1951), where Levinas asserts for the first time the importance of the encounter with the other as a philosophical (and metaphysical) concept.

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[120] Edith Wyschogrod, *Emmanuel Levinas: The Problem of Ethical Metaphysics*, (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974), 5.
[121] Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 34.

Existence and the other: 1947-1951

Like other philosophers trained in the modern European tradition, Heidegger and Levinas

are both concerned to provide accounts of how we know or relate to others. Levinas's

account of the experience of encountering others and his analysis of the ethical obligation

that the encounter entails, which are the central elements of his later work, are developed

most fully in his book *Totality and Infinity* (1963) and subsequent works. I discuss *Totality*

and Infinity and the direction of Levinas's later thought in the following chapter. In this

chapter, I address the earlier development of Levinas's arguments with Heidegger about

the relation with other beings in his lecture series *Time and the Other* (1947) and his essay 'Is

Ontology Fundamental?' (1951). I contend that *Time and the Other* and 'Is Ontology

Fundamental?' represent the continuation of Levinas's dispute with Heidegger begun with

'Ontology Within the Temporal.'

Heidegger's treatment of the 'problem' of encountering others appears in his first major

work, *Being and Time*, as the concept of being-with. I shall set out the main elements of

Heidegger's position before discussing Levinas's criticisms of it.

Being-with in Heidegger

In *Being and Time* (1927) Heidegger is concerned to develop an account of being through an

analysis of Da-sein. One of his central claims about the being of Da-sein is that it is

primordially characterised by being-in-the-world (*In-der-Welt-sein*). Being-in-the-world is a

central aspect of Da-sein's mode of being: he says that being-in-the-world 'is an *a priori*

necessary constitution of Da-sein.'[1] Heidegger's analysis of being-in-the-world shows how

Da-sein's usual manner of encountering the surrounding world is not in terms of objects of

perception and knowledge but as encountering instrumental objects which form part of our

practical activity. The ordinary way that an object like a hammer is for us in our practical

activity is labelled by Heidegger 'handiness' (*zuhandenheit*).[2] In the ordinary course of our

dealing with an object, we tend not to notice or perceive explicitly anything about it, but

rather we attend to what we are doing and use the object more or less automatically.

According to Heidegger, it is in cases where the instrumental object fails in its ordinary

functioning – when it becomes 'objectively present' (*vorhanden*) – that the usually

transparent network of relations which operates to enable us to use the tool unreflectively

can become apparent.

Having argued that a fundamental structure of Da-sein is being-in-the-world, Heidegger

then claims that the fact that there are other humans in the world also enters into the

structure of Da-sein in a fundamental way. Our encounter with other humans is different

from our encounter with entities: 'the kind of being of the existence of the others

encountered within the surrounding world is distinct from handiness and objective

presence.'[3] 'The being to which Da-sein is related as being-with does not [...] have the

kind of being of useful things at hand; it is itself Da-sein.'[4] Similarly, he argues:

> When others become, so to speak, thematic in their Da-sein, they are not encountered
> as objectively present thing-persons, but we meet them "at work," that is, primarily in
> their being-in-the-world. Even when we see the other "just standing around," he is
> never understood as a human-thing objectively present. [...] The other is
> encountered in his *Mitda-sein* ['Da-sein-with'] in the world.[5]

[1] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 53, emphasis in original.
[2] *Zuhanden* and *vorhanden* are translated as 'ready-to-hand' and 'present-at-hand' in the Macquarrie and Robinson translation.
[3] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 118.
[4] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 121.
[5] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 120.

Moreover, according to Heidegger, being-with others is a primordial structure of Da-sein even if others are not literally present or nearby. The claim that 'Da-sein is essentially being-with' is an 'existential-ontological' claim. It does not mean that 'I am factically [that is, in an everyday sense, in fact] not objectively present alone, rather that others of my kind also are.'[6] Being-with is an existential attribute: 'Being-with existentially determines Da-sein even when an other is not factically present and perceived.'[7] Heidegger also claims, briefly and without elaboration, that I can be objectively present with others, and still be alone: 'the being-alone of Da-sein, too, is being-with in the world.'[8] In that case, 'even in being "among them," […] their *Mitda-sein* is encountered in the mode of indifference and being alien.'[9] As being-with, Da-sein 'lets the Da-sein of others be encountered in its world.'[10] I discuss Levinas's interpretation of Heidegger's claims about solitude and letting-be (*Seinlassen*) later in this chapter.

How does Heidegger arrive at this way of characterising our experience of others? In part, Heidegger's thinking on this question emerges from his polemical engagement with other attempts to explain the problem of experiencing others. In the following discussion, I shall take the position of Husserl's 'introduction to phenomenology' in the *Cartesian Meditations* as representative of the position that Heidegger wants to resist. While the *Meditations* were delivered after the publication of *Being and Time*, in speaking of subjects and objects, Husserl persists with a conception of phenomenology that Heidegger would reject.

In the fifth of the *Cartesian Meditations*, Husserl gives a phenomenological account of the complex way we experience others. Husserl argues that we experience others as '"psychophysical" Objects' who govern their respective natural organisms; we also

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[6] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 120.
[7] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 120.
[8] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 120.
[9] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 121.
[10] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 121.

experience them as 'world Objects – not as mere physical things belonging to Nature, though indeed as such things in respect of one side of them'; and at the same time, we experience others as 'subjects for this world' who experience the same world that I experience, and, in the same process, experience me, 'even as I experience the world and others in it.'[11]

The problem for Husserl is to explain the 'thereness-for-me' of others, and on that basis, to give a 'transcendental theory of experiencing someone else.'[12] To meet that challenge, he develops a picture of how we come to know the other's conscious experiences that lie 'behind' their behaviour. He summarises his position in this way: '"In" myself I experience and know the Other; in me he becomes constituted – appresentatively mirrored, not constituted in the original.'[13]

Heidegger holds that in our everyday mode of being, it would appear to be obvious that we are constituted as subjects. Indeed, he asks, 'what is less dubious than the givenness of the I?'[14] But, according to Heidegger, this picture rests on a mischaracterisation of Da-sein. On the mistaken view, 'Da-sein is tacitly conceived in advance as objective presence,' as a self or a 'worldless subject.'[15] This way of thinking about Da-sein rests on a subject-other distinction which is motivated by a misguided 'distinction and isolation of the "I" so that a transition from this isolated subject to the others must then be sought.'[16] Heidegger is unequivocal about this: 'subject and object are not the same as Da-sein and world.'[17]

Heidegger rejects accounts of experiencing others like Husserl's because such accounts begin by positing an isolated subject and proceed to build an account on that basis.

[11] Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans. Dorion Cairns, 1929, (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960), §43, emphasis in original.
[12] Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, §43, emphasis in original.
[13] Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, §62.
[14] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 115.
[15] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 115.
[16] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 118.
[17] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 60.

Heidegger's account of being-in-the-world disdains the language of subjectivity; in general,

Heidegger's new terminology is part of an attempt to recast some of the central problems

of philosophy in ways which will overcome the limitations of the earlier approach. So, for

Heidegger, being-with is a basic aspect of Da-sein's being which is more fundamental than

relating to particular others. In Heidegger's words, 'The world of Da-sein is a *with-world*.

Being-in [the world] is *being-with* others.'[18] In fact, according to Heidegger, the 'others' are

those 'from whom one mostly does *not* distinguish oneself, those among whom one is,

too.'[19] Against accounts which begin with the subject, he says that 'others are not

encountered by grasping and previously discriminating one's own subject, initially

objectively present, from other subjects also present.' Rather, according to Heidegger,

'They are encountered from the *world* in which Da-sein [...] essentially dwells.'[20] Others do

not usually appear to us as minds, but instead in our average, everyday way of interacting:

'being for-, against-, and without-one-another, passing-one-another-by,' or in 'not-

mattering-to-one-another.'[21] As Hubert Dreyfus notes, Heidegger seeks to 'dissolve' the

problem of other minds by uncovering the circumstances – such as when we take the

subject to be an isolable entity – under which our everyday way of dealing with others

breaks down, and which lead us to want to make a distinction between human behaviour

and the psychic life 'behind' it.[22]

As we have seen, an aspect of Heidegger's analysis of being-with is his attempt to describe

the way we relate to others on an average, everyday basis. How does Heidegger

characterise our everyday way of relating to others? In a striking passage, Heidegger says

that as everyday being-with-one-another, 'Da-sein stands in *subservience* to the others':

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[18] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 118.
[19] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 118, emphasis in original.
[20] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 119, emphasis in original.
[21] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 121.
[22] Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World*, 151.

[As everyday being-with-one-another] It [Da-sein] itself *is* not; the others have taken its being away from it. The everyday possibilities of being of Da-sein are at the disposal of the whims of the others.[23]

Heidegger is not claiming that we are at the whim of *particular* others:

These others are not definite others. On the contrary, any other can represent them. What is decisive is only the inconspicuous domination by others that Da-sein as being-with has already taken over unawares.[24]

For Heidegger, we essentially (primordially) 'belong' to these others. In fact, according to Heidegger, we call them 'the others' precisely in order to hide our essential belonging to them. But they are not particular others. In order to emphasis the fact that these others are not anyone in particular, Heidegger calls them the 'they' (*Das Man*). 'We enjoy ourselves and have fun the way *they* enjoy themselves. We read, see, and judge literature and art the way *they* see and judge.'[25] But how does the 'they' constrain or dominate us? According to Heidegger, the 'they' is characterised by 'averageness' and by 'levelling down.'[26] In this way, the 'they' 'prescribes the kind of being of everydayness.'[27] Under these conditions, according to Heidegger, 'everyone is the other, and no one is himself. The "they" [...] is the nobody to whom every Da-sein has always already surrendered itself, in its being-among-one-another.'[28]

As Dreyfus points out, however, the norms and customs of the 'they' supply our everyday, customary or normal comportment. This is what sustains the 'referential whole' that the concept of the 'they' refers to – in Dreyfus's example: 'In the West *one* eats with a knife and

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[23] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 126.
[24] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 126.
[25] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 126-127, emphasis in original.
[26] From Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 127: 'Every priority is noiselessly squashed. Overnight, everything primordial is flattened down as something long since known. Everything gained by a struggle comes something to be manipulated. Every mystery loses its power.'
[27] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 127.
[28] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 128.

fork; in the Far East *one* eats with chopsticks.'[29] Indeed, as Dreyfus observes, the very

functioning of equipment is dependent on social norms, which 'define the in-order-tos that

define the being of equipment, and also the for-the-sake-of-whichs that give equipment its

significance.'[30]

Heidegger calls the self of everyday Da-sein the 'they-self.'[31] He distinguishes the 'they-self'

from the 'authentic [*eigentlich*] self,' which is the self which has 'explicitly grasped itself.'[32]

As Dreyfus observes, the 'they-self,' immersed in average everydayness, is constituted by

social meaning, while the authentic self is self-constituting.[33] I return to the concept of

authenticity in the following chapter.

Having discussed Heidegger's concept of being-in-the-world and being-with, I turn in the

following section to Levinas's criticisms of Heidegger's treatment of these concepts in *Time*

and the Other.

Time and the Other (1947)

The four lectures which comprise *Time and the Other* were delivered by Levinas in Paris in

1946 and 1947 at the Collège Philosophique founded by Jean Wahl. As in *Existence and*

Existents, Levinas's writing is often evocative and unstraightforward. His purpose in the

Time and the Other lectures, he says, is 'to show that time is not the achievement of an

isolated and lone subject, but that it is the very relationship of the subject with the Other.'[34]

Levinas's specific claims about time and its importance for the relationship with the other

emerge in the third lecture, which I address below. First, however, I address Levinas's

engagement in the first lecture with Heidegger's conception of being-with.

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[29] Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World*, 153.
[30] Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World*, 154.
[31] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 129.
[32] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 129.
[33] Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World*, 162, fn.12.
[34] Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 39.

Like *Existence and Existents*, Levinas proceeds in *Time and the Other* by attempting to describe being independent of beings; in this work, he adds the concept of the 'solitude of existing.' Levinas notes in a 1982 interview with Philippe Nemo that his treatment of solitude in *Time and the Other* reflected the fact that solitude had become an existentialist theme. For the post-war existentialists, according to Levinas, existence was 'the despair of solitude,' or 'the isolation within anxiety.'[35] Levinas says that *Time and the Other* 'represents an attempt to escape from this isolation of existing,' as *Existence and Existents* 'signified an attempt to escape from the "there is."'[36] The significance of the themes of solitude and the 'there is' will emerge as I proceed through Levinas's arguments in this work.

Levinas's main criticisms of Heidegger appear in the first couple of pages. Levinas's chief claim in the first lecture is that in his accounts of Da-sein and being-in-the-world, Heidegger fails to think through the relationship between the existent and its existence. Levinas accepts that Heidegger's *Sein-Seiendes* (being-beings) distinction is a significant achievement. Nonetheless, for Levinas, Heidegger fails to consider the existent and existence in their 'separation' – that is, as radically separate – as well as in their interrelation. I discuss what Levinas means by this criticism below.

Moreover, according to Levinas, Heidegger misconstrues the nature of the relationship between Da-sein and the other. As I showed above, however, being-with-others – described by Heidegger using concepts such as *Mitda-sein* ('Da-sein-with' or 'co-existence') – is a primordial (fundamental, originary) element of Da-sein's being in Heidegger's fundamental ontology. On Heidegger's account, being-with-others is equiprimordial with being-in-the-world: 'The world of Da-sein is a *with-world*. Being-in is *being-with* others.'[37] The preposition *mit* (with) in *Mitda-sein* describes a fundamental relationship which

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[35] Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 57.
[36] Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 57.
[37] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 118.

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constitutes human being; Heidegger says that 'only because it has the essential structure of being-with is one's own Da-sein *Mitda-sein* as encounterable by others.'[38] We also saw above that Heidegger considers that I can be objectively present with others, and still be alone. In the case of solitude in the midst of sociality, according to Heidegger, the *Mitda-sein* of the others is 'encountered in the mode of indifference and being alien.'[39] Levinas intends to 'repudiate' the view that solitude obtains 'in the midst' of a prior relationship with the other. This view, he says, is 'anthropologically incontestable,' but 'ontologically obscure.'[40] Levinas says that while Heidegger does posit the relationship with the other as an ontological structure of Da-sein, this way of being-with 'practically plays no role in the drama of being or in the existential analytic,' because all of the analyses of *Being and Time* serve to describe 'solitary Da-sein' or the 'impersonality of everyday life.'[41]

Levinas claims that Heidegger's characterisation of the with-relationship is as 'an association of side by side, around something.'[42] Introducing a concept which appears often in his later work, Levinas says that Heidegger's way of thinking about the Da-sein-other association 'is not the face-to-face relationship.'[43] Levinas says that hopes to show that 'it is not the preposition *mit* that should describe the original relationship with the other.'[44] As he notes later, 'being in direct relation with the Other is not to thematise the Other and consider him in the same manner one considers a known object, nor to communicate a knowledge to him.'[45]

Levinas's notion of the direct relation with the other is more fully elaborated in *Totality and Infinity*, which is the subject of the next chapter. I shall attempt to unravel Levinas's

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[38] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 122.
[39] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 121.
[40] Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 40.
[41] Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 40.
[42] Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 41.
[43] Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 41.
[44] Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 41.
[45] Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 57.

positive claims in *Time and the Other* about the relationship between the existent and its existence in the following paragraphs.

The solitude of existing

Levinas's central claim in the first lecture of *Time and the Other* is that existing is solitary. This is not meant straightforwardly to mean that we are alone. Levinas accepts that 'we are surrounded by beings and things with which we maintain relationships.'[46] Indeed, we are with others through relationships of touch and sight and cooperation and sympathy. According to Levinas, however,

> these relationships are transitive: I touch an object, I see the other. [...] I *am* not the other. I am all alone. It is thus the being in me, the fact that I exist, my *existing*, that constitutes the absolutely intransitive element, something without intentionality or relationship.[47]

I *am* not the other. Levinas says that 'inasmuch as I am, I am a monad. It is by existing that I am without windows and doors, and not by some content in me that is incommunicable. If it is incommunicable, it is because it is rooted in my being, which is what is most private in me.'[48] My relationship with existing is 'the interior relationship par excellence.'[49] Levinas argues that the concept of 'primitive mentality' in the work of philosopher and ethnologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl seemed to open up the possibility of a 'transitive existence' where 'through participation the subject not only sees the other, but *is* the other.'[50] Lévy-Bruhl argues that in 'primitive' people 'collective mental states' govern their participation in collective behaviour which is 'so effectively *lived* that it is not yet properly imagined.'[51] Levinas dismisses this possibility for 'modern' consciousness which,

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46 Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 42.
47 Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 42, emphasis in original.
48 Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 42.; Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, §33.
49 Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 42.
50 Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 42-43.
51 Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, *How Natives Think*, trans. L.A. Clare, 1910, (London: Allen & Unwin, 1926), 362; first

according to Levinas, cannot 'abdicate its secrecy and solitude at so little cost.'[52]

Moreover, according to Levinas, sharing existence is impossible. As he notes in a later interview: 'the fact of being is what is most private; existence is the sole thing I cannot communicate; I can tell about it, but I cannot share my existence.'[53] The solitude that Levinas is positing here has a special sense: is not mere physical isolation, nor the 'the incommunicability of a content of consciousness.'[54] Levinas argues that we *exist* in solitude. In other words, despite the fact that we live in relationships with beings and things in the world, in our relationship with our existing we are utterly alone. At issue is the 'indissoluble unity between the existent [human] and its work of existing,' which is a solitary relationship.

Levinas holds that 'solitude [is] the isolation which marks the very event of being.'[55] According to Levinas, 'to conceive a situation wherein solitude is overcome is to test the very principle of the tie between the existent and its existence.'[56] But – and at this point Levinas's break from Heidegger is clear – this principle is in fact tested. To test it 'is to move toward an ontological event wherein the existent contracts existence.'[57] The event by which 'the existent contracts its existing' is the phenomenon discussed in the previous chapter which Levinas calls hypostasis, and which he posits in contrast to Heidegger's notion of *ek-stasis*. Levinas's intention in this work is to 'go back' to this hypostasis, where the existent takes on its existence.[58] I deal with Levinas's treatment of hypostatis below. First, however, I shall deal with Levinas's other specific criticisms of Heidegger.

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published as Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, *Les fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures*, (Paris: Alcan, 1910).
[52] Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 43.
[53] Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 57-58.
[54] Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 43; cf. the fifth of Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations*. Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*.
[55] Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 57-58.
[56] Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 43.
[57] Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 43.
[58] Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 43.

Why does Levinas think that Heidegger mischaracterises the relationship between an existent and existence? Levinas accepts that Heidegger distinguishes being (*Sein*) and beings (*Seiendes*); in fact, he says that this distinction is the profoundest claim in *Being and Time*:

> One cannot ignore [Heidegger's] distinction [...] between *Sein* and *Seiendes*, Being and being, but which for reasons of euphony I prefer to render as *existing* and *existent* [...]. Heidegger distinguishes subjects and objects — the beings that are, existents — from their very work of being. The first are expressed by substantives or substantivated participles, the other by a verb. This distinction, which is posited from the start of *Being and Time*, permits dispelling certain of the equivocations of philosophy in the course of its history where one started with existing to arrive at the existent possessing existing fully, God.

> The most profound thing about *Being and Time* for me is this Heideggerian distinction. But in Heidegger there is a distinction, not a separation. Existing is always grasped in the existent, and for the existent that is a human being the Heideggerian term *Jemeinigkeit* [mineness] precisely expresses the fact that existing is always possessed by someone.[59]

According to Levinas, the ontological difference is a *distinction* for Heidegger, and not a *separation*. As Richard Cohen observes in a footnote, Levinas means by this claim that Heidegger does not 'think' being and beings in their radical separation from one another, as well as in their interrelation.[60] For Heidegger, being is approached through the analysis of a particular being, Da-sein.[61] But as in *Existence and Existents*, Levinas wants to think being independently of beings. In that work, being independent of beings was called the *il y a* or the 'there is,' and characterised as a 'rumbling' or a 'field of forces.'[62]

Levinas thinks that Heidegger would find the notion of an existence without existents

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[59] Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 44-45.
[60] Translator's footnote no.9 in Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 45. Cohen notes the concept of separation is 'doubtlessly' borrowed from Franz Rosenzweig's *The Star of Redemption*, in which he 'aimed to think humankind, the world, and God, each on their own terms — that is, in their radical separation from one another; as well as in their interrelations.'
[61] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Intro., I.
[62] Levinas, *Existence and Existents*.

'absurd.'[63] But he argues that Heidegger's notion of thrownness (*Geworfenheit*), understood by Levinas as the 'fact-of-being-thrown-in' to existence, suggests the idea of an existence to be thrown into, so to speak, which must precede the existent that is thrown.[64] In the notion of thrownness, for Levinas,

> It is as if the existent appeared only in an existence that precedes it, as though existence were independent of the existent, and the existent that finds itself thrown there could never become master of existence. [...] Thus dawns the idea of an existing that occurs without us, without a subject, an existing without existents.[65]

How can we approach this idea of existence 'without existents'? As in *Existence and Existents*, Levinas asks us to imagine 'all things, beings and persons, returning to nothingness.' As we saw in the previous chapter, after the destruction of all things and persons, all that remains is the 'there is', the anonymous, 'impersonal "field of forces" of existing.'[66] As Cohen suggests, the expression 'field of forces' implicitly refers to Kant's account of the 'conditions of our sensibility' in the 'Transcendental Aesthetic' at the beginning of the *Critique of Pure Reason*; and Hegel's account the 'universal medium' in 'Force and the Understanding' in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*; and Nietzsche's account of the will to power, where he holds that the 'I' is always the product of a preconscious 'it' made up of forces in contention.[67]

The anonymous, abstract existence of the 'there is' is not, says Levinas, the 'indeterminate ground spoken of in philosophy textbooks, where perception carves out things.'[68] This 'indeterminate ground' of earlier philosophy is already a being, a substantive, a 'something.' The pure, ambient existing of the 'there is' that Levinas seeks to describe is the 'very work

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[63] Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 45.
[64] Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 45, ellipsis in original.
[65] Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 45-46.
[66] Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 46.
[67] Translator's footnotes nos.16 and 17 in Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 46-47.
[68] Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 47.

of being,' which 'cannot be expressed by a substantive but is verbal.'[69] Moreover, it cannot

be simply 'affirmed,' because one affirms an existent. Nor can it be denied; it is the 'field

of forces of every affirmation and negation,' and it 'imposes' itself and is 'irremissible.'[70] It

is never attached to an *object that is*, and for that reason it is described as anonymous.[71]

To clarify our understanding of pure existence, Levinas turns to a phenomenological

examination of the experience of insomnia. Insomnia, according to Levinas, 'is constituted

by the consciousness that it will never finish – that is, there is no longer any way of

withdrawing from the vigilance to which one is held.'[72] In insomnia:

> from the moment one is riveted there, one loses all notion of a starting or finishing
> point. The present is welded to the past, is entirely the heritage of the past: it renews
> nothing. It is always the same present or the same past that endures. A memory
> would already be a liberation with regard to the past. Here, time begins nowhere,
> nothing moves away or shades off. Only the exterior noises that may mark insomnia
> introduce beginnings in this situation without beginnings or end, in this immortality
> from which one cannot escape, very similar to the *there is*, the impersonal existence
> about which I was just speaking.[73]

The 'there is', then, is like a 'vigilance without possible recourse to sleep.' Further, this

existing 'is not an *in-itself* [*en soi*],' but rather an 'absence of all self, *without self* [*sans-soi*].'[74] An

alternative way of considering the 'there is', according to Levinas, is to think of this existing

as eternity, 'since existing without existents is without a starting point,' and a subject is

already a beginning.[75] But an 'eternal subject' is a *contradictio in adjecto*, according to Levinas,

for as a subject it would need a beginning, and consequently would 'exclude eternity.'[76]

Levinas notes that Heidegger concept of nothingness turns 'nothingness into existing;' by

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[69] Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 48.
[70] Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 47, 48.
[71] Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 48.
[72] Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 48.
[73] Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 48.
[74] Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 49.
[75] Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 49.
[76] Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 49.

claiming that 'the nothing itself nihilates' ('*Das Nichts selbst nichtet*'), Heidegger gives nothingness a kind of activity or being.[77] According to Levinas, an important consequence of the idea of the 'there is' is that there is being without nothingness. Recalling an theme from his early work, Levinas observes that being without nothingness 'leaves no hole and permits no escape.'[78] Being is 'irremissible, without exit,' and the notion of an irremissible being, Levinas says, 'constitutes the fundamental absurdity of being.'[79] The desire for escape from being of Levinas's early work is the desire for an impossibility.

Hypostasis again

Levinas says: 'Perception and science' – and, I add, Heidegger – 'always start with existents already supplied with their private existence. Is this tie between what exists and its existing indissoluble? Can one go back to hypostasis?'[80] How does Levinas treat the concept of hypostasis in *Time and the Other*? As we saw in *Existence and Existents*, hypostasis is the existent's 'contract' with existence, or the process of 'taking up' existence. Levinas's new step in *Time and the Other* is to speak of hypostasis in terms of a 'departure from self and a return to self' through which we take up a relation with our existing. Consciousness, according to Levinas, refers to a situation 'where an existent is put in touch with its existing.'[81] This process occurs in the 'present':

> The present is the event of hypostasis. The present leaves itself – better still, it *is* the departure from self. It is a rip the infinite beginningless and endless fabric of existing. The present rips apart and joins together again; it begins; it is beginning itself. It has a past, but in the form of remembrance. It has a history, but it is not history.[82]

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[77] Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 49; see Martin Heidegger, 'What is Metaphysics?,' in *Basic Writings from Being and Time (1927) to The Task of Thinking (1964)* (London: Routledge, 2002), 103.
[78] Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 50; the notion of an escape from being is prominent in *On Escape* which is discussed in the previous chapter.
[79] Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 51.
[80] Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 44.
[81] Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 51.
[82] Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 52.

Thinking of hypostasis as a present is difficult: 'On the one hand, [hypostasis posited as a present] is an event and not yet something; it does not exist; but it is an event of existing through which something comes to start out from itself. On the other hand, it is still a pure event that must be expressed by a verb; and nonetheless there is [...] already a something, already an existent.'[83] For Levinas, this process describes the phenomenon of the 'I.' The 'I' is 'amphibolous' or dual-natured: 'it is not a substance, nevertheless it is preeminiently an existent.'[84] Indeed, the 'I' stands 'directly outside the oppositions of the variable and the permanent, as well as outside the categories of being and nothingness,' even though 'the present and the "I" turn into existents, and one can form them into a time, so that they have time like an existent.'[85]

The 'work of identity' is a process of a 'departure from self and a return to self' through which we take up a relation with our existing: we 'master' our existing in this process, and we bear existing as an 'attribute.'[86] This turning back of the go onto itself, says Levinas, is 'precisely neither a serene reflection not the result of a purely philosophical reflection.[87] Levinas says that the ego's relation with itself is, 'as in Blanchot's novel *Aminadab*, the relationship with a double chained to the ego, a viscous, heavy, stupid double, but one the ego is with precisely because it is me.'[88] "'Something that is,'" for Levinas, 'bears existing as an attribute. Existing is its own.'[89] Indeed, according to Levinas, 'my being doubles as a having; I am encumbered by myself.'[90] With the claim that existing is an attribute, Levinas, like Heidegger, breaks from the dominant Western philosophical tradition.[91]

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[83] Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 52.
[84] Amphibolous means having a grammatical structure that allows of two interpretations; equivocal; in logic, capable of two meanings. Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 53.
[85] Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 53.
[86] Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 52.
[87] Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 56.
[88] Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 56, citing Maurice Blanchot, *Aminadab*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1942).
[89] Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 52.
[90] Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 56.
[91] Cf Kant: 'Being is obviously not a real predicate, i.e., a concept of something that could add to the concept

As we saw earlier, Levinas claims that the purpose of these lectures is 'to show that time is not the achievement of an isolated and lone subject, but that it is the very relationship of the subject with the Other.'[92] He notes here, however, that 'positing hypostasis as a present is still not to introduce time into being,' and the concept of the other has not yet emerged in the discussion. This description of hypostasis as the present is incomplete:

> The hypostasis of the present [...] is only one moment of hypostasis; time can indicate another relationship between existing and the existent. This is what will later appear to us as the very event of our relationship with the Other.[93]

By positing existence as something to be 'taken up,' rather than as something with which I already have a relationship, Levinas's critique of Heidegger is clear. I now turn to Levinas's discussion of the relationship with the other which appears in the third lecture.

The other

In the analysis so far, says Levinas, he has dealt with the subject alone, which is 'alone due to the very fact that is an existent'; the subject's solitude (in Levinas's sense) results from its relationship with existence.[94] Levinas observed in a later interview, however, that '*Time and the Other* is a study of the relationship with the Other insofar as its element is time; as if time were transcendence, the opening par excellence onto the Other.'[95] How does Levinas characterise the relationship with the other?

Levinas approaches this question through an analysis of death. For Levinas, our relationship with death is a relationship with something mysterious: 'death is a region from

of a thing.' Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood, 1781, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), A598/B626.

[92] Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 39.
[93] Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 54.
[94] Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 67.
[95] Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 56.

which no one has returned and consequently remains unknown as a matter of fact.'[96] According to Levinas, Heidegger's analysis of being-toward-death, which treats death as Da-sein's 'ownmost possibility,' misunderstands death.[97] For Heidegger, according to Levinas, authentic being-toward-death is a 'supreme lucidity and hence a supreme virility.'[98] Heidegger's authentic being-toward-death is the feat of grasping a possibility, which means coming to understand it. Levinas claims that death is never a present; it is eternally futural, and consequently ungraspable: 'the now is the fact that I am master, master of the possible, master of grasping the possible. Death is never now. When death is here, I am no longer here, not just because I am nothingness, but because I am unable to grasp.'[99]

How does Levinas derive anything about the relationship with the other from his analysis of death? As Cohen observes, Levinas thinks that what is common to death and social life is an encounter with radical alterity.[100] Levinas draws a complicated parallel: according to Levinas, the 'approach of death indicates that we are in relation with something that is absolutely other, [...] something whose very existence is made of alterity. My solitude is thus not confirmed by death but broken by it.'[101] No longer solitary, my existence is 'pluralist': 'a plurality insinuates itself into the very existing of the existent, which until this point was jealously assumed by the subject alone.'[102] This other – in this analysis, death – is 'not unknown, but unknowable, refractory to all light.'[103] My relationship with this other is

> not an idyllic and harmonious relationship of communion, or a sympathy through which we put ourselves in the other's place; we recognise the other as resembling us, but exterior to us. [...] The other's entire being is constituted by its exteriority.[104]

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[96] Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 70.
[97] See Heidegger, *Being and Time*.
[98] Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 70.
[99] Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 71-72.
[100] Translator's footnote no.52 in Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 75.
[101] Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 74.
[102] Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 75.
[103] Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 75.
[104] Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 75-76.

In death, 'the future is what is in no way grasped.' 'Anticipation of the future and projection of the future [...] are but the present of the future and not the authentic future; the future is what is not grasped, what befalls us and lays hold of us. The other is the future. The very relationship with the other is the relationship with the future.'[105]

Death is an 'event' in Levinas's special sense of the term: in other words, it happens to us 'without our having anything absolutely anything "a priori."'[106] Death is where the subject loses its mastery; it is 'the impossibility of having a project.'[107] On this basis, Levinas has taken his analysis to show the possibility of an event in death. Equally, for Levinas, there is the possibility of an event in the encounter with the other human:

> The relationship with the Other [the human other, *l'Autrui*], the face-to-face with the Other, the encounter with a face that at once gives and conceals the Other, is the situation in which an event happens to a subject who does not assume it, who is utterly unable in its regard, but where nonetheless in a certain way it is in front of the subject. The other "assumed" is the Other.[108]

The notion of the encounter with the other developed here is central to Levinas's later thought, though in its later appearances it is for the most part detached from the concept of death.

At this point, the main elements of Levinas's critique of Heidegger are clear for the first time. First, as we have seen, Levinas claims that while Heidegger opposes the contemplative conception of the isolated subject in the Western philosophical tradition, he still posits a Da-sein as a being whose primary mode of encountering the world is one of comprehension. Second, Levinas claims that on Heidegger's account this relation of comprehension extends to the encounter with the other human. These criticisms remain

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[105] Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 76-77.
[106] Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 74.
[107] Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 74.
[108] Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 78-79.

central to Levinas's engagement with Heidegger and stand at the core of his own philosophical project. In the following section, I follow the development of these lines of criticism in an important essay from 1951.

'Is Ontology Fundamental?' (1951)

In his essay 'Is Ontology Fundamental?' Levinas gives another account of the encounter with the other which he had first sketched in *Time and the Other*. The significance of this essay lies in the fact that its central themes – a criticism of Heidegger on the ground that ontology 'reduces the other to the same,' and the claim that the encounter with the other has a special structure – reappear and are reworked in Levinas's major work *Totality and Infinity* (1963). I discuss that work, and Levinas's augmentation of those claims, in the following chapter.

Again, in 'Is Ontology Fundamental?', Levinas's main interlocutor is Heidegger. The central purpose of the essay is to characterize the relation with the other as a relation which does not reduce the other to an object of comprehension. As in his discussion of the relation between being and beings in *Existence and Existents* and *Time and the Other*, Levinas again argues that, even though Heidegger overcame Husserl's 'intellectualist' philosophy, Heidegger's ontology reduces others to something comprehensible, because others are already understood within 'the horizon of being.'[109]

What precisely does that claim mean? Levinas begins by recalling the central elements of his account of the development of phenomenology and ontology. He accepts that Heidegger brings aspects of human being to philosophical clarity. The achievement of contemporary ontology is to assert the 'factual situation' of the 'mind that knows'; in

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[109] Levinas, 'Is Ontology Fundamental?,' 5.

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Heidegger's terms, to assert Da-sein's facticity and historicity.[110] 'This possibility of conceiving contingency and facticity not as facts open to intellection [as in 'classical intellectualist' philosophy] but as the act of intellection,' according to Levinas, 'constitutes the great novelty of contemporary ontology.'[111] Heidegger's entire philosophy, however, is determined by what Levinas calls the 'ontological relation':

> the comprehension of being does not presuppose a merely theoretical attitude but the whole of human comportment. The whole human being is ontology. Scientific work, the affective life, the satisfaction of needs and labour, social life and death – all these moments spell out the comprehension of being, or truth, with a rigour which reserves to each a determinate function. Our entire civilisation follows from this comprehension, even if this comprehension was a forgetfulness of being.[112]

In Heidegger's thought, according to Levinas, 'ontology is the essence of every relation with [other] beings.'[113] Levinas argues that 'comprehension, in Heidegger, rejoins the great tradition of Western philosophy: to comprehend the particular being is already to place oneself beyond the particular' by comprehending it against 'upon the horizon of being.'[114] 'To comprehend,' on this account, 'is to be related to the particular that only exists through knowledge.'[115]

For Levinas, this is a misdescription of the relation with the other. Levinas attempts to describe 'in a very general way' that relation as one which is 'irreducible to comprehension, even to that comprehension beyond classical intellectualism determined by Heidegger.'[116] Why does Heidegger's error arise? According to Levinas, it is an ancient problem for philosophy.

> From the moment that one engages in reflection and precisely for the very reasons

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[110] Levinas, 'Is Ontology Fundamental?,' 2.
[111] Levinas, 'Is Ontology Fundamental?,' 3.
[112] Levinas, 'Is Ontology Fundamental?,' 3.
[113] Levinas, 'Is Ontology Fundamental?,' 4.
[114] Levinas, 'Is Ontology Fundamental?,' 5.
[115] Levinas, 'Is Ontology Fundamental?,' 5.
[116] Levinas, 'Is Ontology Fundamental?,' 5.

which since Plato subject the sensation of the particular to knowledge of the universal, one is forced, it would seem, to subject relations between beings to structures of being, metaphysics to ontology, the existentiell to the existential.[117]

With this claim, Levinas seems to diagnose the source of the problem in philosophical reflection itself. Levinas also introduces a distinction, which will reappear in his work, between metaphysics and ontology. Referring to Heidegger's ontological concept of 'letting' others 'be' discussed above, Levinas asks: 'How, moreover, can the *relation* with [a] *being* be, from the outset, anything other than its *comprehension* as being, the fact of freely letting it be inasmuch as it is being?'[118] His answer is that the relation with a being cannot be anything other than an ontological relation of comprehension – and this is an important claim – unless it is a relation with the other (*l'autrui*).[119] This, for Levinas, is a *metaphysical* relationship. What is special about the relation with the other?

> Our relation with the other certainly consists in wanting to comprehend him, but this relation overflows comprehension. Not only because knowledge of the other requires, outside of all curiosity, also sympathy or love, ways of being distinct from impassible contemplation, but because in our relation with the other, he does not affect us in terms of a concept. He is a being and counts as such.[120]

The advocates of ontology, says Levinas, will not accept this way of speaking about others as beings: is not to speak of beings, they will ask, 'already to insinuate that beings concern us thanks to a revelation of being' – presumably referring to Da-sein's primordial understanding of being – which is from the outset a relation of comprehension?[121] 'To relate oneself to beings qua beings means, for Heidegger, to let beings be, to comprehend them as independent of the perception which discovers and grasps them.'[122] Indeed, for Heidegger, it is through this relation of letting be that the other appears as a Da-sein-like

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[117] Levinas, 'Is Ontology Fundamental?,' 5.
[118] Levinas, 'Is Ontology Fundamental?,' 5-6, emphasis in original.
[119] Levinas, 'Is Ontology Fundamental?,' 6.
[120] Levinas, 'Is Ontology Fundamental?,' 6.
[121] Levinas, 'Is Ontology Fundamental?,' 6.
[122] Levinas, 'Is Ontology Fundamental?,' 6.

being, and not as an object at hand or objectively present. 'Being-with-the-other,'

according to Levinas, 'rests for Heidegger on the ontological relation.'[123]

Here Levinas introduces another central claim about the mode of relating to the other. For

him, our relation to the other is not a matter of letting the other be. Instead, the

'independence' of the other is established in 'the role of being summoned.'[124] The one to

whom one speaks is not initially understood in his being: 'the other is not an object of

comprehension first and an interlocutor second. The two relations are intertwined. In

other words, the comprehension of the other is inseparable from his invocation.'[125] The

other is not something encountered on the basis of a preceding understanding of being.[126]

In particular, the other is encountered as a 'face,' in a 'face-to-face' relation.[127] According

to Levinas, encountering the face of the other has a different structure from vision or

perception. It has the structure of speech: 'a being as such [...] can only be in a relation

where we speak to this being.'[128]

In these passages, Levinas explicitly introduces an ethical claim into what had hitherto been

a scientific phenomenological project. As Peperzak observes, Levinas's lengthy

investigation of the foundations of phenomenology leads him to say, at this point, that the

source of truth is the attitude which permits the other to present him- or herself 'as he or

she is,' which for Levinas is as an other who summons us.[129] In the next chapter, I raise the

question of the relation between phenomenology and ethics in the European philosophical

tradition, and discuss Levinas's major work *Totality and Infinity* (1963), where Levinas takes

up the claims presented in 'Is Ontology Fundamental?' and gives a full account of the

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[123] Levinas, 'Is Ontology Fundamental?,' 6.
[124] Levinas, 'Is Ontology Fundamental?,' 6.
[125] Levinas, 'Is Ontology Fundamental?,' 6.
[126] See Peperzak, *Beyond*, 50-51.
[127] This concept is developed at length in *Totality and Infinity*.
[128] Levinas, 'Is Ontology Fundamental?,' 8.
[129] Peperzak, *Beyond*, 52.

ethical nature of the encounter with the other.

Heidegger and ethics in Levinas's Totality and Infinity (1961)

Raymond Geuss observes that there are several European philosophers who are concerned

with questions of practical life but who are difficult to place in terms of their answers to

the set of questions usually understood as belonging to 'philosophical ethics.'[1] Attempts to

fit philosophers such as Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Adorno and Heidegger under the usual

rubrics of philosophical ethics fail: they do not offer clear instances of either

consequentialist, deontological, perfectionist, or eudaemonistic approaches to ethics.

Although they are concerned with practical life, they offer philosophical reflections which

Geuss characterises as 'radical versions of thinking about practical life.'[2]

These thinkers, according to Geuss, break with the modern post-Kantian approach to

ethics which for the most part tries to answer the question 'what ought I to do?'. Their

grounds for rejecting the main tradition of philosophical ethics take one of two forms: the

'weaker view,' which is that knowing 'what I ought to do' is of marginal importance in

practical life or indeed is not a philosophically significant question; and the 'stronger view',

which is that to ask the question 'what ought I to do?' is a profound mistake or a failing, or

at least that it is a failing to ask that question in a philosophical way.[3] Geuss proposes to

characterise these thinkers as standing 'outside ethics.'

I contend that Levinas's approach to ethics also stands outside the dominant tradition, but

that he takes the weaker view. While he does not entirely reject the question 'what ought I

to do?', he thinks that it is of secondary importance for philosophical inquiry. Levinas does

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[1] Raymond Geuss, 'Outside Ethics,' *European Journal of Philosophy* 11.1 (2003): 29.
[2] Geuss, 'Outside Ethics,' 47.
[3] Geuss, 'Outside Ethics,' 44.

not dismiss the possibility of constructing an ethical framework: he says in an interview, 'my task does not consist in constructing ethics; I only try to find its meaning. [...] One can without doubt construct an ethics in function of what I have said, but this is not my theme.'[4] Nonetheless, his claims about the nature of ethical obligation place him outside the post-Kantian ethical tradition.

While those who for Geuss stand 'outside ethics' are more or less hostile to the mode of ethical inquiry of the dominant philosophical tradition, Levinas's primary target is not the dominant tradition of ethics, but Heideggerian ontology. For that reason, while this chapter addresses Levinas's ethical thought in his major work *Totality and Infinity* (1961), its main focus is on how Levinas's thinking develops in his argument with Heidegger. In the first part of this chapter, I give a brief account of the relationship between Heidegger's ontological project and his approach to philosophical ethics. In the second part, I trace the key claims of *Totality and Infinity*, where Levinas sets out again his criticisms of what he calls 'Heideggerian ontology' and offers an elaboration of his claim that our encounter with the other gives rise to an ethical obligation, which is the central contention of this and later works. In the third part of the chapter and in the following conclusion, I develop some criticisms of those claims with the assistance of Jacques Derrida's long 1964 essay on Levinas, 'Violence and Metaphysics.'

Philosophy and ethics in *Being and Time* and the 'Letter on Humanism'

Heidegger unambiguously rejects the modern approach to ethics. For the Heidegger of *Being and Time*, to ask philosophical inquiry to supply a framework for thought or action is a sign of inauthentic existence. In that work, the concept of inauthenticity appears as deficient mode of (or, so to speak, a 'running away' from) authentic, resolute existence,

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[4] Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 95-96.

which accepts that human existence is ungrounded, temporal and finite.[5] To demand a framework for human action is to hide from oneself these truths about existence.

While authenticity for Heidegger involves *not* thinking that there could be some authoritative answer to the question 'what ought I to do?,' his concept of authenticity has been interpreted by others as having moral content. In *The Jargon of Authenticity*, Theodor Adorno attributes the popularity of Heidegger's work to the ethical connotations of his ontological analysis which are explicitly excluded by Heidegger's ontological project.[6] And as Charles Guignon notes, authenticity seems to point to a way of life which is 'higher' than average everydayness.[7] In part, the difficulty is a function of Heidegger's project, which explicitly claims to be ontological (concerned with being) rather than ontic (concerned with the concrete), and yet must take concrete existence as its starting point. As Robert Bernasconi observes:

> In so far as Heidegger was attempting to do fundamental ontology, he was committed to a formal analysis which withdrew from the concrete. But if Heidegger made the concrete Da-sein his starting-point, it was because he recognised its factical necessity from the outset. To have recourse to a phrase Heidegger would employer later, one cannot jump over one's own shadow. [...] Nevertheless, Heidegger had no qualms in reaffirming that to want to jump over one's shadow remains the vocation of every philosopher.[8]

Nonetheless, Heidegger explicitly disavows any role for philosophy in practical life. In another early text, his *Introduction to Metaphysics* (1935), Heidegger says that 'Philosophy [...] is not a kind of knowledge which one could acquire directly, like vocational and technical expertise, and which, like economic and professional knowledge in general, one could apply

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[5] See, for example, Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 339: Inauthentic self-projection 'is possible only because Dasein has *forgotten* itself in its ownmost *thrown* potentiality-of-being.'

[6] Theodor W. Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, trans. Knut Tarnowski and Frederic Will, 1964, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973).

[7] Charles B. Guignon, 'Authenticity, Moral Values, and Psychotherapy,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*, ed. Charles B. Guignon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 228.

[8] Robert Bernasconi, 'Fundamental Ontology, Metontology, and the Ethics of Ethics,' *Irish Philosophical Journal* 4 (1987): 84.

directly and evaluate according to its usefulness in each case."[9]

Heidegger notes that shortly after the publication of *Being and Time* he was asked when he was going to write an ethics.[10] While he does not record his answer, he comes closest to expressing an unambiguous position on the relationship between ethics and his philosophy in his 'Letter on Humanism' (1947). Heidegger's position in that work is that to ask ethical questions of philosophy (or in a philosophical manner) is a symptom of forgetfulness of being. There, Heidegger says that the task of philosophy is thinking about the truth of being, which is neither theoretical nor practical.[11] 'Thinking' being 'has no result. It has no effect. It satisfies its essence in that it is.'[12]

As we have already seen, Levinas's approach to ethics is entirely different. I turn in the following sections to Levinas's critique of Heideggerian ontology and Levinas's own approach to ethics in *Totality and Infinity*.

Ontology and ethics in *Totality and Infinity*

Totality and Infinity is at the heart of Levinas's corpus. This work is Levinas's first sustained attempt to substantiate his claims that the Western philosophical tradition has failed to give a satisfactory account of the way we encounter others in the world, and in so failing, has neglected the essentially ethical nature of this encounter.

Again, Heidegger is Levinas's main interlocutor. Taminiaux notes that Levinas's preface to the German translation of *Totality and Infinity* says that '[t]his book which wants and feels to be of a phenomenological inspiration proceeds from a long frequentation of Husserl's texts

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[9] Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt, 1935, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 7.

[10] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 255.

[11] Martin Heidegger, 'Letter on Humanism,' in *Basic Writings from Being and Time (1927) to The Task of Thinking (1964)* (London: Routledge, 2002), 259.

[12] Heidegger, 'Letter on Humanism,' 259.

and from paying a ceaseless attention to *Sein und Zeit.*[13] Heidegger's *Being and Time* was a work of fundamental ontology and, as we have seen, Heidegger there and elsewhere gave reasons why his philosophy was not an ethics. As Derrida observes, Levinas gives us simultaneously a metaphysics and a humanism.[14]

I claimed above that Levinas's ethics stands outside the dominant tradition of philosophical ethics, and I noted that Levinas does not prescribe any moral rules. Even though he is concerned with ethics, Levinas's work is best described as a 'pre-ethical' study. As Derrida says,

> It is true that Ethics, in Levinas's sense, is an Ethics without law and without concept, which maintains its non-violent purity only before being determined as concepts and laws. This is not an objection: let us not forget that Levinas does not seek to propose laws or moral rules, does not seek to determine *a* morality, but rather the essence of the ethical relation in general. But as this determination does not offer itself as a *theory* of ethics, in question then, is an Ethics of Ethics.[15]

Levinas appeals to a complex of phenomenological, theological and metaphysics claims in order to argue that the ethical obligation takes the form of a demand that the other makes of me, and that this (fundamentally unsatisfiable) demand is made at a basic level of human experience in our recognition of the other person. He begins, however, with an account of the error of Heidegger's ontology which recapitulates certain criticisms from his earlier work.

Levinas's major claim in section I of *Totality and Infinity* is that whenever Western philosophy has attempted to explain how we encounter others in the world, it has reduced 'the other to the same' (the totality of the title) by interposing 'a middle and neutral term

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[13] Jacques Taminiaux, 'The Presence of *Being and Time* in *Totality and Infinity*,' Paper delivered at *Ethics and Politics in the Work of Emmanuel Levinas* (University of Jerusalem: 23 June 2003), 1, Taminiaux's translation.
[14] Jacques Derrida, 'Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas,' trans. Alan Bass, in *Writing and Difference* (London: Routledge, 2001), 178.
[15] Derrida, 'Violence and Metaphysics,' 138.

that ensures the comprehension of being.'[16] According to Berkeley, for example, we come

to know external objects only insofar as we perceive their qualities; we comprehend objects

by spanning the distance which separates us from the object.[17] For Berkeley, according to

Levinas, '[t]he coinciding of lived experience [of subject experiencing the object] with itself

was revealed to be a coinciding of thought with an existent.'[18]

Levinas argues that this 'ontological imperialism' is even more obvious in the

phenomenological description of the encounter with others. On the phenomenological

account, says Levinas, 'it is the Being of existents that is the *medium* of truth; truth regarding

an existent presupposes the prior openness of Being.'[19] This latter claim means that the

intelligibility of an existent 'is due not to our coinciding, but to our non-coinciding with it.'

For Husserl, our experiences occur against a horizon of anticipated future experiences. In

this way, says Levinas, '[a]n existent is comprehended in the measure that thought

transcends it, measuring it against the horizon whereupon it is profiled,' so that 'an existent

arises upon a ground that extends beyond it as an individual rises from a concept.'[20]

Levinas complains of a similar problem in Heidegger's account. The central thesis of *Being*

and Time, according to Levinas, is that 'Being is inseparable from the [subject's]

comprehension of Being,' which means that 'Being is already an appeal to subjectivity.'[21]

The nub of Levinas's complaint is that Heidegger's account assigns being 'priority' in

relation to other beings ('existents' in Levinas's terminology), and that consequently – this

is the second part of Levinas's major claim – like the rest of the Western philosophical

tradition, Heidegger enslaves ethics to ontology. Because the encounter with other beings

[16] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, 1961, (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 43. This is a reduction to the 'totality' referred to in the title.
[17] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 44.
[18] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 44.
[19] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 44, emphasis in original.
[20] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 45.
[21] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 45.

rests on a precomprehension of being, the encounter with other beings involves a 'reduction' of the other to the same: 'the existing of an existent is converted into intelligibility; its independence is a surrender.'[22] On Heidegger's picture, Levinas argues, 'to broach an existent from Being is simultaneously to let it be and to comprehend it.'[23]

> To affirm the priority of *Being* over *existents* is to already decide the essence of philosophy; it is to subordinate the relation with *someone*, who is an existent, (the ethical relation) to a relation with the *Being of existents*, which, impersonal, permits the apprehension, the domination of existents (a relationship of knowing), subordinates justice to freedom.[24]

How are justice and freedom relevant to an account of our mode of relating to other existents? For Levinas, they describe the two possible ways of relating to others. Unlike its specific meaning in the dominant ethical tradition, where it describes a universal value, Levinas uses 'justice' as another way of characterising the ethical relation with the other. In a similarly unorthodox way, Levinas uses 'freedom' to describe the Heideggerian ontological relation which, for Levinas, is unjust: 'ontology,' which maintains the freedom of the existent, is 'a philosophy of injustice.'[25]

> If freedom denotes the mode of remaining the same in the midst of the other, knowledge, where an existent is given by interposition of impersonal Being, contains the ultimate sense of freedom. It would be opposed to justice, which involves obligations with regard to an existent that refuses to give itself, the Other, who in this sense would be an existent par excellence. In subordinating every relation with existents to the relation with Being the Heideggerian ontology affirms the primacy of freedom over ethics.[26]

The freedom Levinas refers to here is not that of free will. Heideggerian freedom, according to Levinas, 'comes from an obedience to Being: it is not man who possesses

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[22] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 45.
[23] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 45.
[24] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 45.
[25] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 46.
[26] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 45.

freedom; it is freedom that possesses man.'[27] The 'relation with being' of ontology 'neutralises' the existent other in order to comprehend or grasp it. As such, it is 'not a relation with the other as such but the reduction of the other to the same.'[28] This reduction involves a freedom to 'maintain oneself against the other [...] to ensure the autarchy of an I.' This 'primacy of the same,' which ontology taken 'as first philosophy' assumes, 'marks the direction of and defines the whole of Western philosophy.'[29]

The way the other person is encountered is distinguished by several other features. In the essay 'Phenomena and Enigma' published four years before *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas argues that the term 'phenomenon,' which suffices for describing our encounter with non-human entities in the world, is not adequate to describe the way we experience another human.[30] The other's approach to me is enigmatic.

> Language is the possibility of an enigmatic equivocation for better and for worse, which men abuse. One diplomat makes an exorbitant proposition, but this proposition is put in terms such that, if one likes, nothing has been said. The audacity withdraws and is extinguished in the very words that bear and inflame it. Such is the duplicity of oracles: extravagances are lodged in words that guarantee wisdom. [...] This way the other has of seeking my recognition while preserving his incognito, disdaining recourse to a wink-of-the-eye of understanding or complicity, this way of manifesting himself without manifesting himself, we call enigma – going back to the etymology of this Greek term, and contrasting it with the indiscreet and victorious appearing of a phenomenon.[31]

Levinas speaks of the 'disturbance' created by the other who disrupts my ordered sense of myself.[32] Crucially, the other seeks my recognition but at the same time preserves his

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[27] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 45.
[28] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 46.
[29] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 45.
[30] Adriaan T. Peperzak, *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*, (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1993), 62.
[31] Emmanuel Levinas, 'Phenomenon and Enigma,' trans. Alphonso Lingis, in *Collected Philosophical Papers* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1987), 66.
[32] Levinas, 'Phenomenon and Enigma,' 63.

selfhood.[33] The 'indiscreet and victorious' appearance of phenomena contrasts with the 'enigma' of the encountered other who 'manifests himself without manifesting himself.'[34] How is the other encountered? Levinas calls the way the other presents him or herself to me 'face.'[35] The notion of face, according to Levinas, 'brings us to a notion of meaning prior to my *Sinngebung* ['sense-giving' or 'meaning-giving'] and thus independent of my initiative and my power.'[36] In this way, the concept of face is supposed to signify the philosophical priority of the existent over being.[37] The other's mode of presenting him or herself 'does not consist in figuring as a theme under my gaze. The face of the Other at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me. It does not manifest itself by these qualities, but [...] *expresses itself*.'[38] The experience of the other who is present exceeds our idea of them. The 'infinity' of the title of this work refers to the impossibility of containing the experience of the other, which is a consequence of the 'inadequation' (lack of correspondence) of our idea of them to the experience of them as present.

How exactly does Heidegger's ontology insist on the primacy of the same – the reduction of the other to the same, and the priority of the relation to being over the relation to the other – and thereby subordinate ethics? As we saw above, Levinas argues that 'the relation with Being that is enacted as ontology consists in neutralising the existent in order to comprehend or grasp it.'[39] The ontological relation 'is not a relation with the other as such,' but rather 'the reduction of the other to the same.'[40] Thematisation, which is Heidegger's name for the process of 'objectifying' beings encountered in the world 'in such a way that they can "project" themselves back upon pure discovery, that is, they can

[33] Levinas, 'Phenomenon and Enigma,' 66.
[34] Levinas, 'Phenomenon and Enigma,' 66.
[35] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 50.
[36] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 51.
[37] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 51.
[38] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 50-51, emphasis in original.
[39] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 45-46.
[40] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 46.

become objects,' is, according to Levinas, 'not peace with the other but suppression or possession of the other.'[41] For Levinas, 'possession affirms the other, but within a negation of its independence.'[42]

This leads Levinas to develop his boldest claim: that ontology 'as first philosophy' is a 'philosophy of power.'

> A philosophy of power, ontology is, as first philosophy which does not call into question the same, a philosophy of injustice. [...] Heideggerian ontology, which subordinates the relationship with the Other to the relation with Being in general, remains under obedience to the anonymous, and leads inevitably to another power, to imperialist domination, to tyranny. [...] *Being* before the *existent*, ontology before metaphysics, is freedom (be it freedom of theory) before justice. It is a movement within the same before obligation to the other.[43]

This last sentence gives us Levinas's central argument about why the primacy of ontology in Western philosophy is problematic. Ontology as first philosophy gives priority to a relation of comprehension within the subject before the obligation we have to the other. For this reason, the effort of *Totality and Infinity*, says Levinas, 'is directed toward apperceiving in discourse a non-allergic relation with alterity.'[44] What would be such a 'non-allergic' (that is, a non-reactive or non-rejecting) relation with other? What does the ethical relation entail?

The central idea is that the ethical relation is an unsatisfiable demand from the other to us which creates for us an obligation. I shall not dwell on the details of the ethical obligation other than to note that it does not entail any specific moral rules. Hilary Putman observes that this fundamental obligation is a 'perfectionist' obligation, but that it does not give us a

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[41] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 363, Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 46.
[42] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 363, Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 46.
[43] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 46-47.
[44] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 47.

code of behaviour or a theory of justice.[45] Nonetheless, as Putnam says, if the obligation is not taken on, then 'the best code of behaviour or the best theory of justice will not help.'[46] For the purposes of this discussion, Levinas's most important claim is that the ethical relation precedes ontology.

> If ontology – the comprehension [...] of Being – is impossible, it is not because every definition of Being already presupposes the knowledge of Being, as Pascal has said and Heidegger refutes in the first pages of *Being and Time*; it is because the comprehension of Being in general cannot *dominate* the relationship with the Other. The latter relationship commands the first. I cannot disentangle myself from society with the Other, even when I consider the Being of the existent he is. Already the comprehension of Being is said to the existent, who again arises behind the theme in which he is presented. This 'saying to the Other' – this relationship with the Other as interlocutor, this relation with an *existent* – precedes all ontology; it is the ultimate relation in Being. Ontology presupposes metaphysics.[47]

For Levinas, then, metaphysics (in his special sense, the relation to the other, which is enacted in ethical relations) ought to precede ontology (the relation to being).[48]

Derrida's critique

In this section, I shall deal with certain arguments from Derrida's 1964 essay 'Violence and Metaphysics.'[49] As we have seen, Levinas criticises what he calls 'Heideggerian ontology' for subordinating the relation with the other to a prior comprehension of being. In Levinas's words:

> In Heidegger coexistence is, to be sure, taken as a relationship with the Other

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[45] Hilary Putnam, 'Levinas and Judaism,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, eds. Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 38.. Putnam uses 'perfectionist' in Stanley Cavell's sense: 'Perfectionism, as I think of it, is not a competing theory of the moral life, but something like a dimension or tradition of the moral life that spans the course of Western thought, and concerns what used to be called the state of one's soul, a dimension that places tremendous burdens on personal relationships and of the transforming of oneself and of one's society.' See Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 2.

[46] Putnam, 'Levinas and Judaism,' 38.

[47] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 47-48, emphasis in original.

[48] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 79.

[49] Derrida, 'Violence and Metaphysics.'

irreducible to objective cognition; but in the final analysis it also rests on the relationship with *being in general*, on comprehension, on ontology. Heidegger posits in advance this ground of being as the horizon on which every existent arises, as though the horizon, and the idea of limit it includes and which is proper to vision, were the ultimate structure of relationship. Moreover, for Heidegger intersubjectivity is a coexistence, a *we* prior to the I and the other, a neutral intersubjectivity.[50]

Levinas says that he is 'radically opposed to Heidegger who subordinates the relation with the Other to ontology [...] rather than seeing in justice and injustice a primordial access to the Other beyond all ontology.[51]

As we have seen, the core of Levinas's objection is that Heidegger's ontology assigns being 'priority' in relation to the existent, and that like the rest of the Western philosophical tradition, Heidegger enslaves ethics to ontology. Derrida contests Levinas's claims that Heidegger's fundamental ontology subordinates ethics to ontology and the existent to being. Derrida's defence of Heidegger rests on two related claims: that Heidegger is pursuing the 'thought of being,' which is not ethical, and which does not assert any priority over ethical thought; and that Heidegger's ontology does not subordinate the existent to being, because for Heidegger being is nothing outside the existent, so it could in no way precede the existent either in time or in importance. I shall discuss these claims in the remainder of the chapter.

As Derrida reminds us, Heidegger asserts in his 'Letter on Humanism' that the essence of thinking (which for him is philosophy) is the thought or question of being.[52] Moreover, Heidegger makes this claim precisely in the context of a discussion of the relationship between the thought of being and ethics. On Heidegger's account, thinking, the essence of which is the thought of being, is neither theoretical nor practical.

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50 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 67-68.
51 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 89.
52 Heidegger, 'Letter on Humanism,' 264.

[I]n what relation does the thinking of Being stand to theoretical and practical behaviour? [T]hinking is a deed. But a deed that also surpasses all *praxis*. Thinking towers above action and production, not through the grandeur of its achievement and not as a consequence of its effect, but through the humbleness of its inconsequential accomplishment. [...] We measure deeds by the impressive and successful achievements of *praxis*. But the deed of thinking is neither theoretical nor practical, nor is it the conjunction of these two forms of behaviour.[53]

Derrida points out that thinking of being is neither ontology – which thinks beings in their being – nor 'first philosophy,' nor a 'philosophy of power.' As Heidegger observes in the 'Letter on Humanism,' thinking that ponders the truth of being 'is neither theoretical nor practical. It comes to pass before this distinction. Such thinking is, insofar as it is, recollection of being and nothing else.'[54] As Derrida notes, '[s]uch thinking has no result. It produces no effect.'[55] Indeed, being 'foreign to every first philosophy,' the thought of being 'is not opposed to any kind of first philosophy.'[56] Moreover, says Derrida, the thought of being is 'radically foreign to ethics,' but it is not 'a counterethics, nor a subordination of ethics to a function in the realm of ethics that is already secretly violent: the neutral.'[57] According to Derrida, 'the thought of being is neither concerned with, nor exercises, any power,' because 'power is a relation between existents.'[58] As Bernasconi asks, 'how could Levinas attack Heidegger for having subordinated ethics to ontology when Heidegger goes to such pains to displace that question?'[59]

Derrida's second point, closely related to the first, is that Heidegger does not subordinate

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[53] Heidegger, 'Letter on Humanism,' 262-263.
[54] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 259.
[55] As Derrida notes, Levinas tends to construct the *polis* or social organisation whose outline is present in the discourse he is examining. In Levinas's interpretation of Heidegger, what is reconstructed is a city governed by a neutral, anonymous power. As Derrida observes, it is 'paradoxical to see the Heideggerian city governed by a neutral power, by an anonymous discourse' – the 'imperialist domination' and the 'tyranny' in the quotation from Levinas above – 'that is, by the 'they' (*das Man*) whose inauthenticity Heidegger was the first to describe.' See Derrida, 'Violence and Metaphysics,' 171.
[56] Derrida, 'Violence and Metaphysics,' 171.
[57] Derrida, 'Violence and Metaphysics,' 171.
[58] Derrida, 'Violence and Metaphysics,' 171.
[59] Robert Bernasconi, 'Deconstruction and the Possibility of Ethics,' in *Deconstruction and Philosophy: The Texts of Jacques Derrida*, ed. John Sallis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 127.

the existent to being, because being is nothing outside the existent, and could in no way precede it either in time or in importance. In fact, he claims that Levinas already admits as much. In the section of *Totality and Infinity* where Levinas advances these criticisms, he says that 'the primacy of ontology for Heidegger does not rest on the truism: "to know an *existent* it is necessary to have comprehended the Being of existents."'[60] As Derrida observes, this is a strange truism. Heidegger simply does not 'affirm the priority of being over existents' in the way that Levinas charges. 'A banal truism is simply a repetition of the subject in the predicate. Now, being is not simply a predicate of the existent, no more than it is the existent's subject.'[61] In other words, we do not have a relation with being before a relation with the other, because being does not belong to the realm of predication, because it is already implied in all predication in general, and makes predication possible: being conditions our experience of it or any relationship to it, but is not in any meaningful sense 'prior' to it. As Derrida observes, there can be an order of priority 'only between two determined things, two existents.'[62] And, as Levinas has accepted in his earlier discussion of the nothingness of the 'there is' in *Existence and Existents*, being is 'nothing' outside the existent, and so it could not *precede* the existent, 'whether in time, or in dignity, etc.'[63] There is no sense in which being could dominate the existent: as Derrida notes, 'there are few themes which have demanded Heidegger's insistence to this extent: Being is not an excellent existent.'[64]

So, while the thought of being is neither ontology nor ethics nor first philosophy, it does have a certain significance. Indeed, Derrida argues that 'no ethics – in Levinas's sense – can be opened without' the thought of being, because the thought, 'or at least the precomprehension of being,' *conditions* the 'recognition of the essence of the existent (for

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[60] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 45, emphasis in original.
[61] Derrida, 'Violence and Metaphysics,' 169.
[62] Derrida, 'Violence and Metaphysics,' 170.
[63] Derrida, 'Violence and Metaphysics,' 170.
[64] Derrida, 'Violence and Metaphysics,' 173.

example someone, existent *as* other, *as* ofter self, etc.).[65] Derrida claims that without this

'letting-be' of the other 'as something existing outside me in the essence of what it is (first

in its alterity), no ethics would be possible.'[66] According to Derrida, Levinas

misapprehends Heidegger's notion of 'letting be,' which does not mean, as Levinas thinks,

'to let be as an "object of comprehension first," and, in the case of the Other, as

"interlocutor afterward."' On Derrida's reading, Heidegger's notion of 'letting-be'

'concerns all possible forms of the existent, and even those [such as other humans] which,

by essence, cannot be transformed into "objects of comprehension."'[67] Derrida points to

Heidegger's distinction between care (*Sorge*), which is directed toward things handy or

objectively present, and concern (*Fürsorge*, or solicitude), which is the relation of care

directed toward other Da-sein-like beings.[68] 'If it belongs to the essence of the Other first

and foremost to be an "interlocutor" and to be "interpellated," then the "letting-be" will let

the Other be what it is, will respect it as interpellated-interlocutor.'[69]

The import of Derrida's criticism is that what Levinas says of ontology is not true of

Heidegger's thinking of being, which is not ontology, and that Heidegger's attempt to

separate ontology from thinking of being in the 'Letter on Humanism' ought to be

accepted as definitive of his position. Moreover, Derrida claims that the thought or

'precomprehension' of being does not make the other into an object of comprehension,

but in fact permits us to encounter the other in their Da-sein-likeness. I address these

criticisms in the conclusion.

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[65] Derrida, 'Violence and Metaphysics,' 172, emphasis in original.
[66] Derrida, 'Violence and Metaphysics,' 172.
[67] Derrida, 'Violence and Metaphysics,' 172.
[68] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 121.
[69] Derrida, 'Violence and Metaphysics,' 172.

As we have seen, Levinas objects to Heidegger's ontology on the grounds that it assigns being priority over the existent and gives ontology priority over ethics. Levinas argues that the central thesis of *Being and Time* is that 'Being is inseparable from the [subject's] comprehension of Being,' which he takes to mean that being has priority over the existent, since the encounter with the other (existent) rests on a precomprehension of being. On Levinas's reading of Heidegger, the comprehension of other beings involves a *reduction* of the other to the same: 'the existing of an existent is converted into intelligibility; its independence is a surrender.'[1] On Heidegger's account, Levinas argues, 'to broach an existent from Being is simultaneously to let it be and to comprehend it.'[2] By reducing the other to the same agains the horizon of a fore-understanding of being, Heidegger asserts ontology's priority over ethics.

As we have also seen, Derrida contests Levinas's claims that Heidegger's fundamental ontology subordinates ethics to ontology and the existent to being. Derrida claims that Heidegger is pursuing the 'thought of being,' which is not ethical but has no priority over ethical thought; and that Heidegger's ontology does not subordinate the existent to being, because being is nothing outside the existent, so it could not precede the existent either in time or in importance.

Derrida claims that Levinas gets Heidegger entirely wrong on key points. According to Derrida, what Levinas says of ontology is not true of Heidegger's thinking of being, which Heidegger explicitly emphasises is not ontology. Derrida also claims that the thought or 'precomprehension' of being does not make the other into an object of comprehension,

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[1] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 45.
[2] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 45.

but in fact permits us to encounter the other as a fellow Da-sein-like being. Again, he observes that Heidegger makes this claim unambiguously.

Levinas seems to accept that there are real difficulties with his position, and even admits to a certain hypocrisy. As he notes in the preface to *Totality and Infinity*, ours is an essentially hypocritical civilisation which is 'attached both to the True and to the Good'; values which, he argues, are antagonistic.[3] He suggests that '[i]t is perhaps time to see in hypocrisy not only a base contingent defect of man, but the underlying rending of a world attached to both the philosophers and the prophets.' On this argument, the difficulty with asserting any kind priority for a first philosophy reflects the fundamental nature of the world.

As Stéphane Mosès notes, Levinas's work is a 'thinking of the limit' which 'never ceases to refer to what is beyond the discourse of identity even while making it into a theme of its own discourse.'[4] Does Levinas's reading of Heidegger prove what Derrida elsewhere calls the 'Hegelian law' that 'the revolution against reason can only be made within it'?[5] As Derrida asks at the end of his major essay on Levinas:

> Are we Jews? Are we Greeks? [...] Are we (not a chronological question, but a pre-logical one) *first* Jews or *first* Greeks? And does the strange dialogue between the Jew and the Greek [...] have the form of the absolute speculative logic of Hegel, the living logic which *reconciles* formal tautology and empirical heterology?[6]

Derrida does not answer these questions there.[7] In any case, an explicit reconciliation would conflict with Levinas's intention, declared since *Existence and Existents* and

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[3] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 24.
[4] Stéphane Mosès, 'Emmanuel Levinas: Ethics as Primary Meaning,' *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 20.2/21.1 (1998): 21.
[5] Jacques Derrida, 'Cogito and the History of Madness,' trans. Alan Bass, in *Writing and Difference* (London: Routledge, 2001), 42.
[6] Derrida, 'Violence and Metaphysics,' 192, emphasis in original.
[7] The Derrida-Levinas encounter does not end here. In *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (1974) Levinas takes up Derrida's criticisms in 'Violence and Metaphysics.' See Jacques Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, 1997, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999) and Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas*, Second ed., 1992, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999) for fuller accounts.

throughout *Totality and Infinity*, to leave the climate of Heidegger's philosophy.

But has 'the thought of being' always been Heidegger's aim? Heidegger claims in the 'Letter on Humanism,' the project of fundamental ontology in *Being and Time* was a 'preliminary' attempt to approach the truth of being: 'it strives to reach back into the essential ground from which thought concerning the truth of being emerges.'[8] He even says that 'ontology' – which 'always thinks solely the being (*on*) in its being' – is subject to criticism 'not because it thinks the being of beings and thereby reduces being to a concept, but because it does not think the truth of being and so fails to recognise that there is a thinking more rigorous than the conceptual. The poverty of its first breakthrough, the thinking that tries to advance thought into the truth of being brings only a small part of that wholly other dimension to language.'[9] So, twenty years after the publication of *Being and Time*, Heidegger suggests that the ontological project in that work was flawed because it does not think the truth of beings. As we have seen, Derrida's defence rests on Heidegger's claim in the 'Letter on Humanism' that the thinking of being is not ontology. But it is the ontology of *Being and Time* that is the object of Levinas's criticism. Insofar as Levinas's criticisms are directed towards Heidegger' *ontology*, they are well-founded.

As Geuss observes, Heidegger's constant goal was the permanent disabling of philosophy and philosophical ethics.[10] Levinas, on the other hand, attempts to reanimate ethics with a thought 'beyond being,' which is the ethical demand of the face of the other. The result of Levinas's lengthy meditation on phenomenology and ontology up to *Totality and Infinity* is his claim that the primary truth is found in the attitude that enables the other to present him or herself as he or she is, that is, to moral consciousness.[11] Levinas's post-Heideggerian 'metaphysics' is an ethics of obligation to the other.

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[8] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 258.
[9] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 258.
[10] Geuss, 'Outside Ethics,' 42.
[11] Peperzak, *Beyond*, 52.

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