

The Problem with Levinas

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Simon Critchley

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Preface—All that Fall

In the “emancipated” man of modern society, this fracturing reveals that his formidable crack goes right to the very depths of his being. It is a self-punishing neurosis, with hysterical/hypochondriacal symptoms of its functional inhibitions, psychasthenic forms of its derealization of other people and of the world, and its social consequences of failure and crime. It is this touching victim, this innocent escapee who has thrown off the shackles that condemn modern man to the most formidable social hell, whom we take in when he comes to us; it is this being of nothingness for whom, in our daily task, we clear anew the path to his meaning in a discreet fraternity—a fraternity to which we never measure up.

Lacan, “Aggressivity in Psychoanalysis”

The occasion for this book was a fall. Literally. A bump in the middle of the night. Staying in an unfamiliar house on the first night of a short vacation one June a couple of years back, while looking for the bathroom in pitch-blackness at 4:15 a.m., I fell down twenty steps into a basement and suffered a four-part fracture to my proximal humerus. Needless to say, this wasn’t very humorous. I will spare you the gory details, which even involved cadaver bone being used surgically to reconstruct my joint (I am part corpse), but it meant that I spent the entire summer, about three months, unable to write or do much else.

During the spring semester, I’d been teaching Emmanuel Levinas’ work for the first time in many years and it slowly began to dawn on me that I had something new that I wanted to say. For the first time, I began to see clearly the problem that Levinas’ work was trying to pose, and I also began to see my problem with his answer. I first tried to articulate this line of thought in a long, final lecture of my course at The New School and again during a series of seminars at the European Graduate School in the very first days of June. My plan was to spend the summer writing out my ideas, but then I fell, lived on a diet of painkillers, and had to restrict myself to making mental notes. Handwriting was impossible (it was the shoulder of my writing arm) and typing was one-handed and impossibly slow. I just began to store up more and more material in my head. It was really quite an odd experience.

In the last days of July, I was meant to teach a summer school course at Tilburg, in the Netherlands. I didn’t want to go but I had to. I needed the money. To tell the truth, I was still in pretty bad shape. I decided to take a risk, abandon my previous teaching plan, and try and lay out my new thoughts about Levinas surrounded by lots of books, notes, and scraps of paper but without any script. Two lectures became three and eventually four, and I’d like to thank the students for their patience, their attentiveness, and their questions. Thanks to Ivana Ivkovic, the lectures were recorded. Alexis Dianda very kindly offered to transcribe the lectures and then edited them expertly. This book is hers as much as it is mine. Once the transcription was made and the frame and form of the argument became explicit, I rewrote the text, but it still retains the oral style of its original delivery, even if this is a fiction, a conceit. The rewriting of the book was also highly influenced by a class I taught at The New School on mysticism,

and I'd like to thank the enthused students and my co-teacher and friend, Eugene Thacker. Finally, I'd like to thank Peter Momtchiloff for agreeing to publish this book with Oxford University Press and my anonymous readers for their criticisms and suggestions.

I will leave it to the reader to judge the wisdom of this enterprise. All I can say in my defence is that having read and thought about Levinas obsessively for the past thirty-odd years, I found that the apparently improvised and "live" form of the lectures enabled me to express a significant number of things that I have long wanted to say about his work and some rather new things that sometimes surprised me. My inquiry into Levinas was based around five questions, as clear as they were vague. They are the following:

1. What method might we follow in reading Levinas?
2. What is Levinas' fundamental problem?
3. What is the shape of that problem in Levinas' early writings?
4. What is Levinas' answer to that problem?
5. Is Levinas' answer the best answer or might there be other answers?

*

So, was it a happy fall, a *felix culpa* with a second Adam atoning for the sins of the first? Hardly, and for reasons we don't need to go into. But there was something more in this fracturing of the body than a straightforward accident, an orthopaedic trauma requiring a surgical solution. As Lacan says, the fracture reveals a crack: the self-punishing character of the modern, "emancipated" individual and their desperate need to escape the social hell of their surroundings. This "being of nothingness" certainly described my condition. Perhaps it also describes Levinas'. Despite the criticisms of Levinas—which are, of course, attempts at self-criticism—to which I am led in these lectures, I have tried to approach his writing and thinking in a spirit of "discreet fraternity," a fraternity to which I know I will never measure up.

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- ED "Essence and Disinterestedness." In *Basic Philosophical Writings*. Trans. and ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996, pp. 109–27.
- EE *Existence and Existents*. Trans. Robert Bernasconi. Norwell, MA: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1988.
- EP "Enigma and Phenomenon." In *Basic Philosophical Writings*. Trans. and ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996, pp. 65–77.
- IOF "Is Ontology Fundamental." In *Basic Philosophical Writings*. Trans. and ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996, pp. 1–10.
- OE *On Escape*. Trans. Bettina Bergo. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003.
- OTB *Otherwise than Being, Or Beyond Essence*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998.
- RPH "Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism." Trans. Seán Hand. *Critical Inquiry* 17:1 (Autumn 1990), pp. 62–71.
- SUB "Substitution." In *Basic Philosophical Writings*. Trans. and ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996, pp. 79–95.
- TH "Transcendence and Height." In *Basic Philosophical Writings*. Trans. and ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996, pp. 11–31.
- TI *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1973.
- TIH *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*. Trans. A. Orianne. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973.
- US "The Understanding of Spirituality in French and German Culture." Trans. Andrius Valevičius. *Continental Philosophy Review* 31:1 (1998), pp. 1–10.

Lecture One

Hegel or Levinas?

I want to begin by placing these thoughts under the sign of a problem highlighted in the final lines of Derrida's "Violence and Metaphysics" and once again in that essay's final footnote. When "Violence and Metaphysics"—effectively a monograph on Levinas—was first published in 1964, both Levinas and Derrida were pretty obscure figures. Derrida was in his early thirties and already writing with an astonishing level of analytical and critical brilliance. The essay was published in revised format in 1967 in *Writing and Difference*, and it ends with the following remark:

Are we Greeks? Are we Jews? But who, we? Are we (not a chronological, but a pre-logical question) *first* Jews or *first* Greeks? And does the strange dialogue between the Jew and the Greek, peace itself, have the form of the absolute, speculative logic of Hegel, the living logic which *reconciles* formal tautology and empirical heterology after having *thought* prophetic discourse in the preface to the *Phenomenology of Mind*? Or, on the contrary, does this peace have the form of infinite separation and of the unthinkable, unsayable transcendence of the other? To what horizon of peace does the language which asks this question belong? From whence does it draw the energy of its question? Can it account for the historical *coupling* of Judaism and Hellenism? And what is the legitimacy, what is the meaning of the *copula* in this proposition from perhaps the most Hegelian of modern novelists: "Jewgreek is greekjew. Extremes meet"?¹

The first thing to note is that this passage summarizes the entire reading strategy of "Violence and Metaphysics," which can be understood as asking a very simple question: *Hegel or Levinas*? Is difference always referable to a notion of identity, even if this is the identity of identity and non-identity (this is what Derrida means by reconciling "formal tautology and empirical heterology"), or can there be a thought of difference or an experience of difference that falls outside of Hegel's speculative logic? The argument of "Violence and Metaphysics" is, very crudely, that in criticizing the notion of totality, Levinas thinks he's stepped beyond Hegel. The notion of totality is identical to the notion of philosophy—it's an idea Levinas borrows from Franz Rosenzweig. In *The Star of Redemption*, Rosenzweig argues that philosophy, from Ionia to Jena, from Thales to Hegel, is premised on the reduction of multiplicity to totality. Philosophy is based on the sameness of thinking and being that yields the conceivability of the All, of totality.

Levinas thinks he's stepping beyond Hegel with Rosenzweig, but Derrida shows that every attempt to step beyond Hegel falls back into the orbit of the Hegelian dialectic. That's the strategy. It's not that Levinas is wrong, but what he's trying to do cannot be done *philosophically*. To try and speak philosophically about an experience of otherness is to always collapse the other into the same, and thus for Hegel to have

the last word. The attempt to give voice to difference, otherness as such, what's called "heterology" in "Violence and Metaphysics," is something that philosophy tries to name but that exceeds philosophy. The word Derrida uses to describe this in "Violence and Metaphysics" is "empiricism," the pure thought of absolute difference.

We can therefore summarize this extraordinarily long and wonderful essay with the question: is Hegel right or is Levinas right? "Jewgreek is greekjew? Extremes meet." Then we get the final footnote.

But Levinas does not care for Ulysses, nor for the ruses of this excessively Hegelian hero, this man of *nostos* and the closed circle, whose adventure is always summarized in its totality. Levinas often reproaches him. "To the myth of Ulysses returning to Ithaca, we would prefer to oppose the story of Abraham leaving his country forever for an as yet unknown land, and forbidding his servant to take back even his son to the point of departure" (*La trace de l'autre*).²

This is Levinas 101. Philosophy as ontology is always a return to the same, always Ulysses returning to Ithaca after ten years of wandering around the Mediterranean getting into all sorts of trouble, eventually returning home to find out whether or not his wife has been faithful. We oppose that to the story of Abraham, who leaves his country forever and goes into the desert, the story of exile and wandering. That's the Levinasian narrative. Then Derrida says,

The impossibility of the return doubtless was not overlooked by Heidegger: the original historicity of Being, the originality of difference, and irreducible wandering all forbid the return to Being *itself* which is nothing.³

First, the dispute is over the identification of Heidegger with the idea of return. That is indeed true: there is no nostalgia, no call to a return to the Greeks, or indeed Being itself. That's not Heidegger's thought, which is a more an Eckhartian itinerary of errancy and wandering in the desert. Oddly, Levinas here is in agreement with Heidegger. Derrida is obviously being *méchant*, as the French would say. Inversely, there is the thought that the theme of return is un-Hebraic, but that's also *méchant*. Obviously we could cite the Hebraic idea of *Aliyah*, which is usually understood as return, although the word literally means "ascent." Israel is founded on the idea of the right of return. Seen this way, Judaism is about return; Zionism is about return (although Levinas' more subtle understanding of Zionism is based on diaspora and exile and tied to the idea of responsibility). It's not as if there is a straightforward opposition between a Greek idea of return and a Jewish idea of exile. There can be, indeed there is, a Jewish idea of return and a Greek idea of exile. The ideas of Jew and Greek are themselves problematic; they're something Derrida just picks up and uses in order to frame his essay.

Philosophy and Sexual Difference

"Violence and Metaphysics" begins with a strange quotation from Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*. Arnold says that our world moves between two forces: Hellenism and Hebraism. Whoever can understand this movement of forces will understand our culture. However, the culture being referred to here is England. That's right, *England!* That's Arnold's point. The problem with England is that it's too

Hebraic. It's a culture of the letter, a culture of the book, a culture of conscience, and of duty. What England does not have is Hellenism; it does not have "sweetness and light," the Italian Renaissance, and French pâté. In order for there to be a proper balance in culture, English Hebraism needs to be balanced by Hellenism.

What Derrida is working with here is a highly questionable, nineteenth-century cultural archetype that he doesn't really reflect upon. He continues, and this is the part I want to focus on:

It is true that "Jewgreek is greekjew" is a *neutral* proposition, anonymous in the sense execrated by Levinas, inscribed in Lynch's *headpiece* "Language of no one," Levinas would say. Moreover, it is attributed to what is called "feminine logic": "Woman's reason. Jewgreek is greekjew." On this subject, let us note in passing that *Totality and Infinity* pushes the respect for dissymmetry so far that it seems to us impossible, essentially impossible, that it could have been written by a woman. Its philosophical subject is man (*vir.*). (Cf., for example, the *Phenomenology of Eros*, which occupies such an important place in the book's economy.) [A section of *Totality and Infinity* about which Derrida said earlier in the essay, he's not going to talk about—SC] Is not this principled impossibility for a book to have been written by a woman unique in the history of metaphysical writing?⁴

It's a very interesting thought, and this is partly what Irigaray will pick up on in her reading of Levinas. It's not that philosophical discourse is masculine, it's that philosophical discourse covers over masculinity under the guise of neutrality, under the guise of the concept. You know, when someone says, "It doesn't matter whether you're a man or a woman, philosophy is just a series of problems with a set of concepts. A good argument is a good argument irrespective of gender or biology." That's what we're talking about here.

Now, the fact that Levinas' text is marked as masculine is an innovation in "the history of metaphysical writing," as Derrida says in a very Heideggerian formulation. It's the strategy of metaphysics to disguise the fact of gender under the anonymity of the concept. The paradox of Levinas' work is that it has an explicit male signature. That's its radicality, as Irigaray will say. It's also a feature of his work that makes it hugely problematic. Levinas' text is a text marked by sexual difference or, as Derrida would more hyperbolically say, *essentially* marked by sexual difference. Sexual difference is a problem. Some would even say it is *the* problem. Irigaray, in the introduction to *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, raises the question of sexual difference as the question of our time, the question we pass over in silence.

Sexual difference is one of the major philosophical issues, if not the issue of our age. According to Heidegger, each age has one issue to think through, and only one. Sexual difference is probably the issue in our time which could be our "salvation" if we thought it through. But, whether I turn to philosophy, to science, or to religion, I find this underlying issue still cries out in vain for our attention.⁵

It's a very Heideggerian moment. Heidegger will say at the beginning of *Being and Time* that the question of our time is the question of Being; and yet, not only do we not raise this question, we are not even perplexed by it—it's a question marked by silence. For Irigaray, the question of sexual difference is the question of our time, the question that "cries out in vain for our attention."

It's under the question of sexual difference that I want to think about Levinas' work. This is going to come back to the centre of Lecture Four, though there is a lot more we could say on the topic now. We could, for instance, dispute the reading of *Ulysses*

contained in the final footnote to “Violence and Metaphysics.” Joyce’s *Ulysses* is not about νόστος (*nostos*), returning home or homecoming, but what we could in bad Greek call ανόστος (*anostos*), never returning or the absence of home. I think that one of the things that makes Joyce’s *Ulysses* so compelling is that it’s a book about the absence of home rule: the impossibility of home rule both as a central political concept in the context of Irish history in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and also about the impossibility of home rule in relationship to the οἶκος (*oikos*), the dwelling. If you recall, the Jewgreek and greekjew, Leopold Bloom and Stephen Dedalus, finally meet and go back to Bloom’s house at the end of *Ulysses*. They both take a piss in the garden, their streams of piss intersect, and they depart without any reconciliation, Hegelian or otherwise. Upstairs is Molly Bloom, menstruating, sexually fantasizing, engaged in a completely other discourse, what Lacan would call another *jouissance*, a different experience of enjoyment. *Ulysses* is staging the impossibility of home rule. Stephen Dedalus says, “Home also I cannot go.” Stephen Dedalus is someone who has already left home. *Ulysses* is the story of a son, Stephen, who has renounced a father and a father without a son, Rudy, the dead son of Leopold Bloom. It’s a story of the absence of home rule told in relationship to this experience of another enjoyment, Molly Bloom’s endlessly wonderful exuberance.

Sexual difference is the sign under which I want to put this set of thoughts, and then see where it all goes. That’s what I have here and, again, we’ll see whether it works or not. I’m not sure whether it will. I’ve got the skeleton of something but there’s no muscle or fat, there’s just a pile of bones and many, many, small pieces of paper. Let’s see what happens.

Why Philosophy? The Problem of Method

The first question I want to consider is, what method might we follow in reading Levinas? The argument of the Preface to *Totality and Infinity* is very interesting. Basically, what Levinas claims is that we live in a world of war. We live in a time of war, within a frame of war, and Levinas is against that war, which is both the war of all against all in the Hobbesian sense of the war in a state of nature and the actual war between states that fatally punctuated Levinas’ life. Against war we can posit peace, and not just any peace but a messianic peace. Levinas writes,

Morality will oppose politics in history and will have gone beyond the functions of prudence or the canons of the beautiful to proclaim itself unconditional and universal when the eschatology of messianic peace will have come to superpose itself upon the ontology of war. (TI 22)

What on earth does that mean? Levinas calls Franz Rosenzweig’s *The Star of Redemption* “a work too often present in this book to be cited” (TI 28). If you read *The Star of Redemption* alongside Levinas, then you will begin to get a sense of how important it is. What makes Levinas different from Rosenzweig is that Levinas wants messianic peace (a discourse that is prophetic in the Biblical sense), but his conviction in *Totality and Infinity* and throughout all of his work is that whatever messianic peace means, it has to be translated into philosophy, it must become *philosophical*.

We might open a parenthesis at this point—a huge parenthesis that in many ways covers the whole of Levinas’ work—and ask the question, why does it *have* to be

philosophical? Levinas never answers that question. You can make exactly the same argument and say that the history of the world is a history of war, totality, and brutality, and that philosophy is bound up with that (in Hegel, for instance), and that's why we need to leave philosophy behind. That's more or less Rosenzweig's strategy. It's also the strategy of another book written in the First World War, Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. Philosophy can only meaningfully reduce itself to propositions of logic that are reducible to tautology or to the empirically verifiable propositions of science. The point of the *Tractatus* is to show that what can be made sense of is just not very interesting. What's actually important is something (ethics, aesthetics, religion) about which nothing philosophical could be said—at least in the early Wittgenstein.

But Levinas wants to insist on the translation of that thought into philosophy or, as he will say later on, to translate the Bible into Greek. Why? It's a question that haunts his entire work. Let's go with the thought. We need to translate the Bible into philosophy. What does philosophy mean? For Levinas, philosophy means phenomenology. What does phenomenology mean? Phenomenology, what Levinas takes from Husserl, means the application of the method of intentional analysis. What does intentional analysis mean? It means "the search for the concrete" (TI 28). That is, not the empirically concrete but the concrete understood as the structuring a priori principles under which both we and the world are constituted. Levinas writes,

Notions held under the direct gaze of the thought that defines them are nevertheless unbeknown to this naive thought, revealed to be implanted in horizons unsuspected by this thought; these horizons endow them with a meaning—such is the essential teaching of Husserl. (TI 28)

Intentional analysis is the movement from what appears to be the case (i.e., the empirical) to the a priori structures of the empirical that the latter presupposes. That's what the concrete is. To rephrase that in Heideggerian terms, our everyday experience of life in the world might well be as a subject or things with brains who oppose a world of objects, and that might be the way things appear in a naturalistic world view. Heidegger's point is that the concrete a priori structure of naturalism is what we are as Being-in-the-world. Intentional analysis is the attempt to look through the empirical to the a priori structure. These are what Heidegger called the "existentials."

Again, philosophy is identical with transcendental method, with the deduction from the empirical to its a priori structures. Why am I labouring that point? For the simple reason that that is the Levinas 101 story: Levinas has this intuition we can call, for want of a better word, a religious intuition, and it's the same intuition we could find in thinkers, like Rosenzweig, couched in the language of messianic eschatology. But Levinas wants to translate that intuition philosophically and believes phenomenology is the method that will allow him to do so. Therefore, *Totality and Infinity* is a phenomenology of the deep structures of experience, what he calls "experience in the fullest sense of the word" (TI 25).

Against Aristotle: The Meaning of Drama

We always have to look out for footnotes. They're very important and always symptoms of some deeper anxiety. The first footnote in *Totality and Infinity* that isn't merely a reference to some other work or a later section in the book is the following:

In broaching, at the end of this work, the study of relations which we situate beyond the face, we come upon events that cannot be described as noeses aiming at noemata, nor as active interventions realizing projects, nor, of course, as physical forces discharged into masses. (TI 28 fn. 2)

This is really interesting. At the end of *Totality and Infinity*, in the section entitled “Beyond the Face” that we will turn to in Lecture Four, Levinas says that we stumble upon something that is neither reducible to “noeses aiming at noemata” nor the relationship between an intentional act and an intentional object, which is the basic correlational structure of Husserlian phenomenology; but neither is it reducible to the relationship between “active interventions realizing projects” (an allusion to Heidegger or Sartre) or “physical forces discharged into matters” (a reference to a naturalistic view of things). None of that’s going to work. He continues, and this is important.

They are conjunctures in being for which perhaps the term “drama” would be most suitable, in the sense that Nietzsche would have liked to use it when, at the end of *The Case of Wagner*, he regrets that it has always been wrongly translated by action. But it is because of the resulting equivocation that we forego this term.

(TI 28 fn. 2)

Where did Nietzsche come from? Remember that it’s 1961 and as Levinas is writing these words, the Eichmann trial is unravelling and Wagner is banned in Israel and isn’t really on anybody else’s playlist. It’s a surprising allusion to say the least. Returning to the text interrupted by the footnote, Levinas claims that what he’s trying to describe in *Totality and Infinity* is not explicable in terms of the Heideggerian concept of truth as disclosure (*Erschlossenheit*, as Heidegger will say). Disclosure, he says, is a “play of lights” (TI 27). He will also say, a little further down, that “No prior disclosure illuminates the production of these essentially nocturnal events” (TI 28). The Heideggerian idea of truth as disclosure is a “play of lights,” bringing things to the light, bringing things into the *Lichtung*, the space of the clearing of Being, the lighting of Being.

What Levinas is trying to describe is something nocturnal, something bound up with the night, with sleep and the absence of sleep, with insomnia. The relation of the same to the other, Levinas says, it is not reducible to knowledge of the other and not even “to the revelation of the other to the same” (TI 28), which is a fundamentally different from disclosure. What Levinas is trying to describe is accessible neither through the language of disclosure nor that of revelation. Something is revealed but it is a study of conjectures *in* Being, namely, it is still ontological. We will come back to that. It is something that is best described by the word “drama.”

What exactly does Nietzsche say? If you go to *The Case of Wagner*, this is what you will find:

It has been a real misfortune for aesthetics that the word drama has always been translated as action [*Handlung*]. It is not Wagner alone who errs at this point. The error is world-wide and extends even to the philologists who often know better. Ancient drama aimed at scenes of great *pathos*—it precluded action (moving it *before* the beginning or *behind* the scene). The word *drama* is of Doric origin, and according to Doric usage it means “event,” “story”—both words in the hieratic sense. The most ancient drama represented the legend of the place, the “holy story” on which the foundation of the cult rested (not a doing but a happening: *dran* in Doric actually does not mean “do”).⁶

Nietzsche was, of course, a philologist, a good one—but he was also a self-consciously bad one at times. He knew when he was making mistakes. Socrates helped Euripides write his plays! He knew that was crazy. Drama is normally understood as action. As Aristotle said in the *Poetics*, tragedy is μίμησις πράξεως (*mimesis praxeôs*), the imitation of action. If Aristotle said it, it must be true, right? Everyone loves Aristotle; such a relief after Plato. Imitation of action, it makes perfect sense. But Nietzsche thinks this is a huge mistake. The idea that drama or tragedy is an action is an error. *Drama* (δρᾶμα, *drâma*), the Doric not the Attic word, is not πρᾶξις (*prâxis*). Rather, δρᾶμα means event or story, which is related to ἱερός (*hieros*), which means priestly or sacred. Drama is the representation of a holy story. It's perfectly obvious what Nietzsche is saying here. If tragedy were about action, then there would be action in tragedy, right? The problem is there isn't action. In drama there's inaction. The action happens elsewhere, offstage. You never see the action in tragedy, only the inaction onstage. So, what does Aristotle mean when he says that tragedy is μίμησις πράξεως? Tragedy should be μίμησις ἀπράξεως (*mimêsis apraxeôs*), imitation of inaction. Drama is about an event or a story in relation to an action that is displaced. Oedipus puts out his eyes offstage. Agamemnon, Cassandra, and Clytaemnestra are murdered offstage. An exception is Ajax, who kills himself with his sword onstage, but in tragedy we don't get to see most of the nasty stuff.

Returning to Levinas' footnote, the thought here (and it's just a thought) is that in "Beyond the Face," and maybe elsewhere too, Levinas is trying to write a drama, a holy story. I don't mean that as a judgement or critique. My thought is to try and approach Levinas' work as a drama and see what might show up. It may be more "disclosive" (to use a bad word) than approaching Levinas' work as philosophy or phenomenology.

Moral Ambiguity

Although it is only now becoming better known, Levinas had serious and persistent literary ambitions. In the 1920s, he wrote a significant number of poems in Russian. During his captivity in Germany for five long years, 1940–5, Levinas expressed the desire to write two novels called *Triste opulence* and *Irréalité et amour*. Fascinatingly, the third volume of Levinas' *Oeuvres complètes* was published in French in 2013 and includes his literary sketches, drafts, and five sets of notes on eros. They are absolutely compelling.⁷ There are two truncated drafts of stories, possibly the beginnings of a novel, one called *Eros* and the other *La Dame de chez Wepler*. Although the precise dating of these texts is hard to determine, it would appear that Levinas was still working on drafts until 1961, the same time as he was finishing *Totality and Infinity*. Both texts deal with the memory of the collapse of France after the German occupation in 1940, where this ruination of the nation is experienced by the narrator of the stories as an awakening of eros in a situation where suddenly, as Dostoevsky said (and Levinas cites him), "everything is permitted." The pulling down of the drapery of the state and the sudden exhilaration of both the absence of authority and the presence of barbarism seems to awaken a complex sexual (avowedly heterosexual) desire in Levinas. It is difficult to describe these literary texts as successful, and it is hard for us

to read them other than symptomatically, but they show that Levinas' literary ambition never left him and he conceived of his own activity in intensely dramatic terms.

I'm suggesting here that we think of Levinas' work not as philosophy in the usual sense, but as drama. In a book on philosophy and tragedy that I've been failing to finish for years, I develop the view that the core of tragedy is the experience of moral ambiguity, where justice is on both sides and one is swayed one way and then the other. The lesson of tragedy, the truth of what Plato would see as its lie, consists in the ability to bear moral ambiguity. This means that justice is not one but is at least two, and the experience of tragedy is watching one conception of justice turn into its opposite and then turn inside out. Justice is conflict.

What we have in the 31 extant Greek tragedies—though thankfully most don't correspond to any simple model of tragedy—is an experience of ambiguity. The most classical examples of this would be the *Oresteia* and the *Antigone*. In the *Antigone*, for example, there is an *agôn* (ἀγών), a conflict, around the meaning of the term νόμος (*nomos*), the law. Is law something that human beings organize and administer, as Creon will claim, or is law something that the gods decree, as Antigone will claim? The drama is a staging of conflict that—and here I would both agree and argue with Hegel—does not aim towards the victory of either side but is the dramatization of the collision between those two claims. Drama is the enactment, the literal enactment, of ambiguity, of moral ambiguity. And here's a separate but hugely important claim for me: this is why Plato/Socrates in books 2 and 3, and once again (and why once again?) in book 10, of the *Republic* has to shut drama down, kick Homer and the tragic poets out of the philosophically well-regulated city. The tragic poets, through the illusory, theatrical depiction of extreme states of rage, grief, and lamentation, introduce an ambiguity into the soul, they lead spectators to be in contradiction with themselves in a way that philosophy has to master. Philosophy is an activity of self-mastery that requires the extensive regulation of affects like grief and laughter.

I want to reverse those Platonic arguments and to see drama (I'm using the term in the way Nietzsche and Levinas are using it) as a challenge to philosophy, as another way of thinking about philosophy. I think the problems we suffer in philosophy are problems due, at least in part, to an inadequate understanding of drama. If you see Levinas as a dramatist—a reading Levinas himself here justifies by offering it and then snatching it back—it opens up a very different reading of his work, one that I will try and develop in these lectures. Levinas claims he will understand the pages of “Beyond the Face” as drama, but because of “the resulting equivocation” he will forgo the term. We will not forgo that term. We will follow through on Levinas' own covert understanding of what he is up to. The thought I'm trying to announce here is that if you think about philosophy as drama, and in particular a drama that is concerned with the staging of the question of eros, as Levinas says here, then it might get us somewhere interesting. When we get to the *Song of Songs* in Lecture Four, it is clear that this extraordinary text is a drama about eros. It's a staging of the erotic.

Let's look to the appearance of the word “drama” at the beginning of *Otherwise than Being*.

Being's interest takes dramatic form in egoisms struggling with one another, each against all, in the multiplicity of allergic egoisms which are at war with one another and are thus together. War is the deed

or the *drama* of the essence's interest. (OTB 4; my emphasis)

You could find a thousand examples like this. What Levinas is describing is a kind of Hobbesian theatre of death, which is the drama of the state of nature, the war of all against all. It's like the Jacobean machine plays of Webster, who saw the skull beneath the skin. That is a place where drama pops up in Levinas: the drama of politics. Often drama will appear in Levinas in relation to Plato, and here's another quotation: "From the irony of essence probably come comedy, tragedy and the eschatological consolations which mark the spiritual history of the West" (OTB 176). Here's another reference to drama in "Enigma and Phenomenon": "Does not the invisibility of God belong to another game, to an approach which does not polarize into a subject-object correlation but is deployed as a drama with several personages?" (EP 67) Is not the relationship to the divine to be understood dramatically? A divine comedy? This is something that comes up repeatedly. Drama can describe the drama of the war of all against all, the drama of the relationship to the divine; it can pop up all over the place. Once you begin looking for the word "drama" in Levinas' work, you find it everywhere.

The Seduction of Facticity

This is the suggestion: a new method of reading Levinas that understands him theatrically, as a dramatist. The nice thing about that is that if you read Levinas as a dramatist, then all of those analytic anxieties about argument, rigour, and those tedious phenomenological niceties about whether or not this is this really Husserlian enough just slip away. You think, "Ah, great, it's drama, it's ambiguous. Hurrah!" That's way too cheap. I know, and I don't mean it like that. But drama, I think, is a method, and Levinas intends it in reference to Nietzsche as a kind of holy story of the conjunctures in being. But let's look at something much more specific that will take us directly into our second question: what is Levinas' fundamental problem? The notion of drama gives us a clue to what I see as the driving problematic of Levinas' work, a problematic that is also often described in dramatic terms as comedy but more often as tragedy. The dramatic problem of Levinas is, in a word (and I'll make good on this), what looks like a comedy ends up being a tragedy. That's Levinas' reading of Heidegger in a nutshell, and this is the point where we have to begin to approach our good old friend Martin, or, as we say in New York, Martini Heidegger—the question of being shaken, but not stirred.

The text I want to begin with here is "Is Ontology Fundamental?." It's a very important text. It's the first text where Levinas introduces the idea of the ethical, which is introduced not as the substantive noun "ethics" but as the adjectival "ethical." Levinas' claim in "Is Ontology Fundamental?" is—to make this clearer if you don't know this text well—that any comprehensive relationship to beings or to things is an ontological relationship. Any relationship to any thing that is a relationship of understanding is ontological. Are *all* relations to things relations of comprehension? If, for example, I say "Coke Zero" and I lay that concept under an intuition of a Coke Zero bottle, then I have grasped it as an ontological relation. Are all of my relationships to things in the world like my relationship to my Coke Zero bottle? The

philosopher always chooses medium-sized dry goods as examples. Such is the poverty of philosophy. But there is one thing, one example of a relation that is not reducible to comprehension, and this is what Levinas calls the relation to *Autrui*, the Other, which is described with the adjective ethical. The relationship to the other person is not reducible to comprehension. That is Levinas' apparently descriptive phenomenological claim. That relation to the Other, irreducible to comprehension, is described with a number of terms in "Is Ontology Fundamental?." He describes it as a relation of prayer, for which we can use the term "religion." He also says—and this is where the adjective is introduced—he says, "we accept the ethical resonance of that word and all its Kantian echoes" (IOF 8).

"Is Ontology Fundamental?" was published in 1951. In the previous few years Levinas is writing very little. He writes a few things about his experience of captivity after he gets back from the war, but none of it gets published because nobody really cared. *De l'existence à l'existant*, which had been written in captivity during the war, was published in 1947 by Georges Blin in Editions de la Revue Fontaine after being refused by the much more prestigious Gallimard. In contradistinction to the intellectual context of the Libération in France, dominated by the existentialism of Sartre and Camus, the book was published with a red banner around it with the words "*où il ne s'agit pas d'angoisse*" (where it is not a question of anxiety). Then he gives these lectures at the Collège Philosophique of Jean Wahl in 1946–7, I think, published as *Time and the Other* in 1948, and then he goes quiet. During these years Levinas is engaged in a period of intense Talmudic study with his rabbi, the enigmatic Monsieur Chouchani, Levinas' live-in teacher of Talmud. Levinas, remember, was an administrator in a Jewish high school in Paris. The family had the use of an apartment on top of the school, and the rabbi moves in. It must have been cozy. Apparently, Chouchani was a very disorderly Uruguayan, who also happened to be a genius. Levinas isn't writing much philosophy in those years.

In 1951, with "Is Ontology Fundamental?," we begin to get the full articulation of the break with Heidegger and the first announcement of ethics. But, importantly, ethics is not a substantive term; there's not *an* ethics in Levinas. Ethical is a term used to describe a relation to another, a relation that cannot be reduced to comprehension. That's the thought, and that's really all he says in this paper. Levinasian ethics is adjectival, not substantive.

Let me back up a bit into the essay because we need to work out Levinas' philosophical background more carefully. Why was Heidegger so seductive? Why was Heidegger such a powerful figure for Levinas? For Levinas, the basic advantage of Heidegger's ontology over Husserl's phenomenology is that it begins from an analysis of the situation of the human being in everyday life, what Heidegger, after Wilhelm Dilthey, calls "facticity." Facticity is the key concept that Levinas takes from Heidegger. It should be in flashing lights: *facticity*. To talk transcendental for a moment—and why not, it's Monday afternoon—what is the condition of possibility for the Heideggerian project? The condition of possibility for the Heideggerian project, which is a project into the meaning of Being, is that there is an understanding of Being. We couldn't ask for the meaning of something without an understanding of it. The condition of possibility of the Heideggerian project is what Heidegger calls

Seinsverständnis, the understanding of Being, which is vague and average but, as Heidegger says, can be phenomenologically clarified. That's the work of *Sein und Zeit*, to clarify phenomenologically that vague and average understanding of Being. Heidegger doesn't get there. He doesn't even get 20 percent of the way there. As he says, *Sein und Zeit* is a fragment. That's the thought.

Who cares about ontology? Who cares about metaphysics? Levinas does. It matters because, for Heidegger, the investigation into the meaning of Being does not presuppose a merely intellectual attitude but a rich variety of intentional life, emotional and practical as well as theoretical. What Heidegger does is not to raise anew the question of Being—any fool could do that. As a proper understanding of Heidegger would have to conclude, it's not really Heidegger's issue. What's important is the linking of what he calls fundamental ontology to the rich variety of intentional life, practical as well as theoretical (although Heidegger refuses that distinction).

What Levinas fundamentally agrees with is Heidegger's critique of what Levinas calls "intellectualism" or what we might call "theoreticism." Ontology is not an intellectual issue, it's not something I intuit contemplatively in some sort of Aristotelian βίος θεωρητικός (*bios theôrêtikos*); it's a practical, finally embodied, affective process. The fundamental agreement between Levinas and Heidegger can be found in his critique of Husserl in his doctoral thesis from 1930, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, which was the first book published on Husserl in any language. If you read the conclusion to the doctoral thesis, what really jumps out is the Heideggerianism of Levinas' critique. Husserl's phenomenology is a right method of doing philosophy, Levinas suggests, but the problem is that it's intellectualist and anti-historical. There is no understanding of facticity and there's no understanding of historicity. Levinas takes that aspect of his thinking from Heidegger and it reappears in all his subsequent works. (Of course, this is a critique of Husserl that any Husserlian worthy of the name could refute in about thirty seconds with reference to *Ideas II* and the *Krisis* manuscripts).

At War with Oneself

Let's skip forward to *De l'Existence à l'Existent*. This title is badly translated as *Existence and Existents*. The title should be "From Existence to the Existent," from *Sein* to *Dasein*—that's what Levinas means here. If Heidegger's work moves from *Dasein* to *Sein*, from *Bewusstsein* (consciousness) to *Dasein* to *Sein*, then Levinas' work moves in exactly the opposite direction, from Being to *Dasein*, to the existent. This also means that we move from the ontological to the ontic. At the end of the introduction he makes a deep remark that people read way too quickly. He says,

If at the beginning 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. (EE 19; my emphasis)

What Levinas claims is that his work is dominated by the thought that we have to "leave the *climate*" of Heidegger's philosophy. What does the word "climate" mean? I like to link it, in a sense, to an ethos, which can be thought of as the climate or

environment for thinking. Levinas' claim is that there is a profound need to leave the ethical climate of Heidegger's thinking, but we cannot leave it for one that would be pre-Heideggerian. What does that mean? It means that once we accept Heidegger's paradigm shift in philosophy, there's no turning back. What is that paradigm shift? That paradigm shift is a shift from an intellectualist or theoreticist philosophical discourse to one that is fundamentally founded on the idea of Being-in-the-world, and Being-in-the-world is something thrown and factual. There's no way back before Heidegger. It's important to note that because if Levinas is at war with Heidegger, which he is on most pages of his work (particularly after the war, as it were), then he's at war with himself. He's at war with that part of Heidegger that is and continues to be convincing. That's what makes it interesting. Heidegger was a Nazi. Big deal. There were lots of Nazis. Who cares? There were Nazis and there were non-Nazis. It's not intrinsically important that Heidegger was a Nazi. It's only important if, like Levinas, you think that he was philosophically right. Levinas was completely persuaded by Heidegger's philosophy. Levinas was a Heideggerian.

Levinas finished the book on Husserl in 1930. It ends with a Heideggerian critique of Husserl and then he begins to write a book on Heidegger. He's halfway through the Heidegger book, it's all going very well, and then news comes from across the Rhine that Heidegger has joined the National Socialists (a political party with dark designs on people like Levinas) and has become Rector of Freiburg University. The drama of Levinas' relationship to Heidegger only has importance if you think Heidegger is right. If, like the people at *The New York Review of Books*, you think Heidegger is just some bullshit artist, then it's of no consequence at all. It's just fake liberal outrage. For Levinas, Heidegger was right. He was right because of this insight into facticity, which I will try to bring out more clearly.

Furthermore, I think there's also something deep here, in the sense in which I think that the correct philosophical attitude is to be at war with yourself. If you're not, you're either not being honest or you're not doing good work. If you know what you think, then it's just going to be boring. You have to begin from the idea that you don't know but you think, and that what you think is probably conflicted at some deep level. Writing is a way of staging that and maybe working it through. Derrida makes a nice remark—I don't cite Derrida enough these days—in his last interview with *Le Monde*. He says, "Je suis en guerre contre moi-même."⁸ When he gave the interview, he knew he was dying of pancreatic cancer and he's at war with the idea that philosophy can provide a consolation in the face of death. This is precisely the road Foucault travelled in those last couple of years. Dying of AIDS, he reads Seneca and we end up with a neo-Stoic discourse: philosophy is a way of life. Derrida would say, "That won't do, it's too easy." For Derrida, there's constant war. For Levinas, the relationship to Heidegger comes out as this crazy polemic: "He's a pagan, he's a Nazi." Yet, it's also self-directed. It has to be otherwise it would have no interest. When you lose your cool, when you start to rage at your mother, or your mother, or your mother, what comes out is not just directed at her. You're usually just spouting off against a mirror. It's you, but you usually don't see yourself. That's what it means to be at war with yourself. It's neurosis, it's fine; it keeps us alive.

Heidegger's Comedy Turns Tragic

The essential contribution of Heideggerian ontology is the critique of intellectualism. Ontology is not, as it was for Aristotle, a contemplative theoretical endeavour. At the end of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, as we all know, philosophy can lead to the *bios theôrêtikos*, the contemplative life, the theoretical life. Ontology is, according to Heidegger, grounded in a fundamental ontology of the existential engagement of human beings in the world, which forms the “anthropological” preparation for the question of Being (“anthropological” is in quotes because that was always the accusation used against Heidegger by Husserl and others).

Levinas' version of phenomenology “seeks to consider life as it is lived” (TIH 155). This is the dream, and this is why he rejects Husserl's phenomenological reduction. He says that the phenomenological reduction is an “act in which we consider life in all of its concreteness but no longer live it” (TIH 155). The Levinasian fantasy, let's say, is a fantasy of philosophy as a consideration of life as we live it. That's what Heidegger seemed to offer to so many other people in that period: Hannah Arendt, Karl Löwith, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Herbert Marcuse, and all the rest of his students. The overall orientation of Levinas' early work might be summarized in the following sentence from the opening pages of his doctoral thesis: “the knowledge of Heidegger's starting point may allow us to understand better Husserl's endpoint” (TIH 155). I'm going to lay that out in more detail when we get to the material in the next lecture because to get that clear I'm going to have to go a little further into *Being and Time*. The thirty-second version would be that, for Heidegger, the human being's fundamental means of disclosure is *Stimmung* (mood or attunement), which discloses us as *Geworfen* (thrown). The idea of mood disclosing one as thrown is the idea of facticity. Facticity is that disclosure of oneself as stuck to oneself. Being is being riveted to oneself. That's the Heideggerian thought Levinas hears more than anything else.

Let's go into “Is Ontology Fundamental?” and then back to drama. The problem with Heidegger, which is really *the* problem for Levinas, is its dramatic quality. Specifically, how what appears to be comedy ends up being tragedy. At the beginning of “Is Ontology Fundamental?,” in the section entitled “The Ambiguity of Contemporary Ontology,” he says,

The identification of the comprehension of being with the plenitude of concrete existence risks drowning in existence. This *philosophy of existence*, which Heidegger for his part refuses, is only the counterpart, albeit inevitable, of his conception of ontology. (IOF 3)

This means that Levinas has already read and digested Heidegger's “Letter on Humanism” from 1946 that was published in 1949, where he criticizes the “philosophy of existence” or existentialism. Levinas continues,

The historical existence that interests the philosopher insofar as it is ontology is of interest to human beings and literature because it is *dramatic*. When philosophy and life are intermingled, we no longer know if we incline toward philosophy because it is life or hold to life because it is philosophy. The essential contribution to the new ontology can be seen in its opposition to classical intellectualism. To comprehend the tool is not to look at it but to know how to handle it.

(IOF 3–4; my emphasis)