

THE PLACE OF TOTALITY IN EMMANUEL LEVINAS'
PHILOSOPHY: BEING, SUBJECTIVITY AND THE TEXT

CENTRE FOR NEWFOUNDLAND STUDIES

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SHELDON HANLON

**The Place of Totality in Emmanuel Levinas' Philosophy:
Being, Subjectivity and the Text**

by

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Abstract

This thesis seeks to illustrate the importance of totality in the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. The first chapter shows how his early struggle with totality is a direct response to Martin Heidegger and the history of Western thought. I understand Levinas' early thought as a reformulation of the Heideggerian distinction between Being and beings and claim it aims at presenting a notion of subjectivity that is not to be interpreted as a totality. The second chapter will take this new notion of subjectivity and show how it results in methodological problems when Levinas uses the language of subjectivity to express the idea of the absolute Other, an idea which escapes all concepts. The textual difficulties mentioned in the second chapter will lead us into a discussion of Levinas' later thought, where I will show that his Saying-Said correlation demands that totality have a crucial and unreducible place in his thought. The need for both 'Same' and 'Other', accordingly, will allow me to evaluate how Levinas' thought fits into the history of philosophy, and how it is at the same time outside it.

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Sheldon Hanlon,
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Introduction

It is common for Emmanuel Levinas' thought to be understood as an attempt to overcome ontology. For Levinas, ontology is the philosophical enterprise that tries to understand the relation between human beings and the world, and between human beings themselves, in terms of a unity by using a neutral term like Heidegger's Being or Hegel's Spirit. The history of philosophy, claims Levinas, has been a history of ontology that has not allowed for the possibility of genuine 'otherness'. Levinas' central idea is that of an Other that cannot be understood as part of a totality and thus as something that escapes our desire for unity. Levinas' Other is not an epistemological concept but an ethical one. That is, the Other is not something that cannot be brought under the totality of things known. In his later works, the Other is primarily the other person and the source of ethics. Levinas places the 'good' over the 'true' and claims that the subject's relation with the Other is more fundamental than any epistemological or ontological relationship with the world. The Other cannot be contained within a systematic totality and for this reason it is the Infinite, the overflowing, the uncontainable. Levinas' thought seeks to escape Being and this term 'Being' is used to signify a history of philosophy that has sought to reduce the Other to the Same, that is, to a systematic totality. His escape from Being is at the same time an escape from tradition and the history of Western thought stemming from the Greeks.

Levinas' thought seeks to escape totalitarian thinking and to communicate the significance of the Other as 'otherwise than Being'. What does it mean to 'escape Being'? Does this need to escape imply that ontological matters are insignificant or not worth considering? *My thesis seeks to illustrate that ontology, or totality, holds a crucial place in Emmanuel Levinas' thought.* By taking his early works as a starting-point and showing

how he is working in the same tradition as Heidegger, I will illustrate how they try to work out a reformulation of the question of Being. In this reformulation, Levinas tries to go 'beyond' Heidegger by showing that it is possible to conceive of pure existence without appeal to a subject or a world. Levinas does not intend to simply refute Heidegger's ontology, but to put it in its proper place. The work of Jacques Taminiaux will be useful in treating Levinas' relation to Heidegger. As Taminiaux points out, Levinas achieves the goal of putting ontology in its proper place by reformulating the relation between existence and existents (Heidegger: Being and beings) and, more important, the subject's relation to time. Levinas' early works, I suggest, intend to create an 'opening' in ontology that allows for an escape, an opening that Levinas claims is not possible in the structure of Heidegger's thought. Levinas' analyses are meant to show how Being allows itself to come into contact with Otherness. Levinas' early essay 'On Escape', I suggest, marks the beginning of his attempt to escape Heidegger and Western thought. I will present *Existence and Existents* and 'Time and the Other' as texts that expand on this original notion of escape.

The second chapter will focus solely on *Totality and Infinity*. I will show there that Levinas' mature works have not abandoned the earlier attempts to escape totality and that Levinas' notion of ethical subjectivity is consistent with his earlier thought. Suggesting that his philosophy relies on many dualistic distinctions like totality and infinity, ontology and ethics, war and peace, etc., I will focus on the distinction between interiority and exteriority and will try to figure out the precise relation between the Same and Other. These dualisms are crucial because Levinas relies on them in order to distinguish himself from past thinkers and to emphasize the separation between ethics and ontology – a separation that cannot be bridged by any mediating term. Using the work of Colin Davis as a reliable source, my analysis will reveal that understanding the relations

between the terms of Levinas' dualisms, notably interiority and exteriority, and trying to express them in words results in textual problems that Levinas himself was aware of.

Levinas does indeed succeed in separating the subject from ontology, but his very method and manner of communication cannot avoid reducing the Other to the Same. In *Totality and Infinity* Levinas betrays the otherness of the Other by using the language of sequential narrative. These textual problems, which are left unresolved by both Levinas and me, will lead us into the third chapter of the thesis.

The third chapter, which will focus on the texts *Otherwise than Being* and *God, Death and Time*, will concentrate on the Saying-Said correlation and its relation to ethical subjectivity. In this chapter I will show how Levinas links ethical subjectivity to the textual concerns that occupy his later thought. The problem of how to express the Other in words is itself the heart of ethical subjectivity in Levinas' thought. For Levinas, the 'Said' refers to propositions or statements that may appear in spoken language or written text. The Said is associated with ontology because it reduces its objects to a system of finite concepts and determinations. The Saying, on the other hand, is prior to any written or spoken word and is the fundamental situation that allows for the Said to be formulated. I will establish that the Said is necessary for the Saying and that there can be no Saying without a Said. I will then suggest that the need for the Said is an admittance on Levinas' part that totality is a necessary element of his thought. I will provide further evidence of my claim by showing that his notion of justice depends on the Said just as much as it depends on the Saying. Ethics, I will conclude, needs ontology.

On a wider scale, I aim at showing that although Levinas struggles to escape totalitarian thinking, that totality cannot be completely eradicated from his thought, nor can it be rendered inauthentic nor trivial. Having illustrated the importance of totality for Levinas' thought, I will be allowed to situate his philosophy within the context of the

history of philosophy, for I will have shown that the very history of philosophy he tries to 'go beyond', as the history of ontology, plays an instrumental role in Levinas' very own philosophical method. Levinas' philosophy teaches us to have a heightened sensitivity to the methods and words we use in communicating our ideas. The successes and failures of his own thought require that we pay a certain homage to the Same. This homage comes in the form of needing the Same in order to carry out the work of justice.

My analyses, I think, are long overdue in the community of Levinasian scholarship. Although much has been written on Heidegger's influence on Levinas, little has been said on the significance of totality for his thought. His thought does not simply seek to leave totality behind, but to show how ethics, as beyond totality, forces us to reconsider its role in philosophy and life itself.

Before we jump into the text, I would like to add a couple of disclaimers. First, I will intentionally stay away from Levinas' relation to Judaism. Much can be said about Levinas' relation to Judaism and I do believe in many ways that his philosophy is inspired by and inseparable from his understanding of Judaism. Levinas himself would agree that his philosophy and his Judaism go hand-in-hand. This thesis, however, wishes to focus solely on the relation between subjectivity and totality as a philosophical problem. Levinas' relation to theology leads to me to my second disclaimer which involves Levinas' latest work after *Otherwise than Being*, namely, a collection of essays called *Of God Who Comes to Mind*. This late work seeks to communicate the idea of God without appeal to Being. His latest aspirations as I understand them are consistent with my claim that totality is an indispensable element to his thought. Due to time constraints and the narrow focus of my thesis, I choose to leave this later work aside. We will now turn to Levinas' early works.

Chapter I

Levinas' Early Reformulation of Being

1.1 Introduction

This chapter of the thesis will deal with Levinas' early works: 'On Escape', *Existence and Existence* and 'Time and the Other'. My goal will be to illustrate that Levinas' early philosophy is an attempt to offer a new understanding of what the relation between Being and subjectivity is without offering a 'totality' or 'unity' between man and the world. One of my chief aims is to illustrate how Levinas' mature ethics is anticipated in these earlier works. Starting with 'On Escape', I will trace Levinas' quest to 'go beyond' ontology and will focus particularly on the role the subject has in escaping Being and the method Levinas uses in communicating these ideas. This text, thus, is mainly preparatory in that it anticipates my later concern with the text and its relation to ethical subjectivity.

1.2 Levinas' Struggle with Ontology

Levinas' quest to free his notion of the absolute Other from the grips of ontology may give the impression that ontology has an unimportant role in his thought. One may be led to believe that ontology, for Levinas, is so derivative that it might not worth investigating or paying sufficient attention to. Levinas never makes such a claim against ontology, and his early works are in fact attempts to address the urgency of how to reformulate the question of Being without offering a totality. I think this urgency Levinas addresses in his early works is forgotten by readers of his later works. The validity and significance of ontology for his philosophy are clouded by his later attempt to understand ethics while avoiding ontological language. My analysis begins here with a chronological

treatment of Levinas' early texts, in which I will show how his early works are in fact attempts to reformulate the Heideggerian question of Being without offering a totality, that is, an ontology.

Levinas is combating two thousand years of Western philosophy's endless attempts to understand the relation between man and the world as a totality. This philosophical enterprise of trying to establish a totality or harmony is precisely what Levinas means by 'ontology'. His thought is an attempt to free the subject and, in his later works, the Other, from any systematic or totalizing framework. This 'ontologizing', as he puts it, has most often accounted for the relation between man and world in terms of Being:

And Western philosophy, in effect, has never gone beyond this. In combatting the tendency to ontologize [*ontologisme*], when it did combat it, Western philosophy struggled for a better being, for a harmony between us and the world, or for the perfection of our own being. Its ideal of peace and equilibrium presupposed the sufficiency of being. The insufficiency of the human condition has never been understood otherwise than as a limitation of being, without ever having envisaged the meaning of "finite being." The transcendence of these limits, communion with the infinite being, remained philosophy's sole preoccupation . . . ¹

Philosophy has sought to go beyond being but, in Levinas' estimation, has always arrived at a new totality, a new way of assimilating man, the world, and the Other, under a new unity. Plato, Plotinus, Hegel, Bergson, Husserl and Heidegger are notable examples, in Levinas' view, of thinkers who strive to think in terms of a harmony. Levinas sees Martin Heidegger's phenomenological ontology as philosophy's latest attempt to form a harmony between man and the world. Heidegger's uses the relation between *Sein* and *Dasein* as a way of understanding the meaning of human existence and the possibilities it faces. When

¹Emmanuel Levinas, *On Escape*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 51.

Levinas criticizes ontology, most often his target is Heidegger². Thus it is no coincidence that Levinas focuses heavily on the question of being in his early works, only to move toward a method that tries to show that the meaning of Being in fact relies on the notion of Otherness. In *Existence and Existence*, published in 1947, Levinas admits the influence of Heidegger's thought, but with a caveat:

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.³

Levinas does not want to go back to the Greeks or to a decisive point in the history of philosophy before Heidegger. In fact, his early works try to determine the place of ontology without denying it any significance or reducing it to a more primordial sphere of existence. From his earliest works we can see that Levinas is most concerned with overcoming and 'going beyond' ontology. For this reason, an analysis of Levinas' early works demands that we come to terms with his struggle with this German thinker. Levinas goes to great lengths to present a reformulation of the question of Being that is not Heideggerian. The Levinas of 'On Escape' (1935) is already concerned with going beyond the totalizing concept of being. As his philosophy matures, Levinas is concerned not only with going beyond the ontological but with grounding it. This grounding comes in the form of showing how a certain feature of the subject's relation with the world itself allows for the possibility of any understanding of Being. This 'condition' – which will

²It is of considerable debate within Levinasian scholarship whether Levinas' reading of Heidegger is accurate and fair. We will not entertain this debate now. Instead, we will focus more on what Levinas is trying to avoid and the steps he takes to achieve his philosophical goals. For a treatment of Levinas' reading of Heidegger, see Darin Crawford Gates, 'Ontological Disclosure and Ethical Exposure: Heidegger and Levinas on Meaning, Subjectivity, and Non-Indifference', *Philosophy Today* 45(4) (Winter 2001): 319-334.

³Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Boston: Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, 1978), 19.

later become a 'situation' or 'structure' – is the subject's relation with the Other [Autrui]⁴. As we will also see, the precise problem of how to *articulate* such a grounding without betraying the notion of the Other will pose textual problems for Levinas in his mature philosophy.

1.3 The Significance of Husserl and Heidegger for the Early Levinas

Levinas himself has not given a strict name to his method, but he does call himself a phenomenologist. What he means by the term 'phenomenology' is heavily influenced by Heidegger's interpretation of Edmund Husserl's thought. It is outside the scope of the thesis to treat Levinas' relation to Husserl, but I will say a few words about it here. Levinas' first main publication, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology* (1930), introduced France to Husserl and phenomenology. Two years later he introduced Heidegger's *Being and Time* in his essay, 'Martin Heidegger and Ontology' (1932). In the work from 1930, Levinas accuses Husserl of intellectualism, that is, of understanding the 'I' as the source of knowledge without appeal to history or anything outside the constitution of the pure ego. What is crucial for us here is Levinas' ontological interpretation of Husserl. Levinas reads Husserl through the lenses of Heidegger's *Being and Time* and maintains that phenomenology relies on a fundamental understanding of 'Being'. In the work from 1930, Levinas asks, "Is not the world presented in its very being as a center of action, as a field of activity or of *care* – to speak the language of

⁴In the spirit of commentators such as Edith Wyschogrod and Colin Davis, I will use the term 'Other', which cannot be brought under a totality, as a translation of '*le Autrui*' and 'other', which, like food, can be brought under a totality, to translate '*le Autre*'. Levinas himself explicitly makes the distinction between the 'Other' and 'others' in 'Time and the Other', and carries the distinction into *Totality and Infinity*. Although Levinas is not entirely consistent with the distinction, it nevertheless helps us keep track of the two types of otherness in his thought.

Martin Heidegger?”⁵. The importance of Heidegger for Levinas’ understanding of phenomenology is crucial for his early thought. Levinas’ Heideggerian reading of Husserl is also reiterated in his 1959 essay, “Reflections of Phenomenological ‘Technique’”:

Thus, phenomenology as a revelation of beings is a *method of the revelation of their revelation*. Phenomenology is not just the fact of letting phenomena appear as they appear; this appearing, this phenomenology is the essential event of being.⁶

Heidegger removes phenomenology from the primacy of the ‘I’ and views human existence as a temporal activity, thus restoring history to phenomenology. However, Levinas at the same time accuses Heidegger of subsuming all things and people under the general term ‘*Sein*’. This problem of how *Sein* ‘accounts’ for all ‘beings’, which has become known as the problem of the ‘ontological difference’, leads Levinas to conclude that otherness cannot be preserved because *Sein* brings all otherness under its scope. One may debate whether Levinas’ reading of Heidegger is correct. For our purposes, it will suffice to note that Levinas’ notion of the ‘beyond’ of ontology, and what will later become the ‘Other’, is meant to escape all concepts and determinations used in traditional thought, and thus is meant to ‘go beyond’ the ontology he sees at work in Husserl and Heidegger. This fundamental idea of a ‘beyond’ or ‘Other’ will become the motivating force as his thought matures. Since Levinas views Heidegger’s thought as a positive contribution to phenomenology, it is safe to say that both Heidegger and Husserl are, in Levinas’ eyes, accomplices in reducing otherness into the Same.

When Levinas focuses on the question of the meaning of Being in his early works, he is addressing the problems he sees in both Husserl and Heidegger. His insistence that

⁵Emmanuel Levinas, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl’s Phenomenology*, trans. Andre Orianne (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 119.

⁶Emmanuel Levinas, *Discovering Existence with Husserl*, trans. Richard A. Cohen and Michael B. Smith (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 97.

ontology has a 'beyond' is a criticism that is aimed at Husserl's intentionality and Heidegger's *Sein-Seiendes* correlation. Nevertheless, his crediting Heidegger with taking phenomenology to a new level explains his explicit preoccupation with Heidegger's philosophy of Being. One of his main goals in his early works is to show how Heidegger's 'Being-in-the-world' is not the fundamental starting-point for the question of the meaning of Being. This goal is also meant to dislodge the primacy of Husserlian intentionality, for Levinas will claim that phenomenological inquiry is made possible by a more fundamental feature of human existence. Levinas sets out to show how there is a situation prior to consciousness that cannot be brought under the gaze of Husserlian intentionality or Heideggerian ontology. Even in 1935's 'On Escape', Levinas tries to break the Heideggerian and Husserlian link between consciousness and existence. Rather than understanding existence as a Heideggerian 'project', he understands it as a burden, as something that must be escaped. It is fair to say that the early Levinas is a phenomenological existentialist who claims that we are rooted to existence with the need to escape from our Being. In the next section, we will begin tracing the development of Levinas' new reformulation of the question of being by looking at 'On Escape', a work that anticipates many of the key distinctions and ideas of his later thought.

1.4 'On Escape': The Need to Take Leave of Being

'On Escape', published in 1935, is Levinas' first original work in which he expounds his own ideas rather than offering an interpretation of another thinker. The essay from 1935, which is our main focus here, was originally written for a journal of which his friend and colleague Jean Wahl helped direct. In retrospect, Levinas sees this essay as bearing witness "to an intellectual situation of meaning's end, wherein the existence attached to being forgot, on the eve of great massacres, even the problem of its

own justification.”⁷ Levinas’ thought is not only a response to the Holocaust, but an explanation and validation of it. His philosophy struggles to leave the Heideggerian atmosphere that can potentially give rise to such catastrophes.

The history of philosophy has been unable to avoid bringing the relation between man and world under a unified whole. In terms of Being, the verb ‘to-be’ refers only to itself and the idea of pointing beyond being has become an absurdity in Western thought. Levinas suggests there is a ‘need to escape’ the self-referring, or tautological, notion of Being. But what does Levinas’ term ‘escape’ refer to? As Cohen points out brilliantly, how are we to communicate the ‘beyond’ of ontology when ontology itself is meant to encompass everything, especially when the language we use inevitably conceptualizes what it speaks of? To suggest that ‘escape’ refers to *something* is to betray it by subsuming it under a higher determination of being or objectivity.

The early Levinas views the problem of escape as an existential dilemma. However, this escape is not to be understood under the opposition between an ‘I’ and ‘non-I’ *per se* but between ‘I’ and ‘existence’ itself. This is not an escape from the world, death or social conventions. The escape ultimately refers to the need to escape the Heideggerian distinction between *Sein* and *Seiendes*. Levinas prefers the term ‘ex-cendence’ over ‘transcendence’ because he views the latter as still relying on a particular interpretation of Being. His dislike of the term ‘transcendence’ also helps him distinguish himself from thinkers such as Hegel and Husserl. As Rolland suggests, this escape, or ex-cendence, is also the need to escapes one’s body⁸, an idea that returns in his later notion of ethical substitution. This need to escape is a need to abandon one’s nakedness, the ‘I’ that relegates itself to being⁹. His point is that human existence should not be exhaustively

⁷*On Escape*, 1.

⁸*On Escape*, 29.

⁹*On Escape*, 55.

understood by using the term 'Being'. This notion of human existence is perhaps Levinas' first step in trying to escape Heidegger. Levinas also favors the term 'existence' (*l'être*) over the German 'Being' (*das Sein*), and 'existent' (*l'étant*) over 'entity' (*das Seiendes*). For Levinas 'existent' generally refers to the human being, so his choice of words over Heidegger's may be simply a simple translation of two terms already in philosophical currency. Levinas' notion of human existence, however, is not identical to Heidegger's and this analysis intends to point out these differences.

All this language of escape remains ambiguous partly because there is no particular 'destination' that is to be sought. To take a phrase from the later Levinas, it is a question without an answer. If language cannot adequately express the nature of this departure from being, then one must question the worth of such an idea. Levinas can only speak of escape analogically as trying to 'get outside of oneself' and 'taking leave'. Levinas thus cannot *name* the destination of escape because all names have ontological significations, that is, language conceptualizes its objects. He wrestles with this problem of the text in *Otherwise than Being* when he says that the Saying is betrayed by the Said. This problem of trying to escape ontology by depending on ontological language is a main concern for me in this thesis, and the successes and failures of Levinas' attempts to escape totality is what I wish to examine.

The merit of 'On Escape' does not lie in Levinas' ignorance of certain problems that will dominate his later thought, but in the remarkable consistency of certain ideas that he does not relinquish even in his later works. Among these is the explicit distinction war and peace, associating ontology with the former and escape with the latter.¹⁰ The need for escape is not yet an ethical issue for Levinas, but an existential one. The 'existential' does

¹⁰*On Escape*, 53.

not mean 'ontological' because this is an existentialism that tries to break through the harmony of the philosophical enterprise known as ontology. Thus when he poses the question of infinity, he claims that it is not an issue because the ego cannot conceive of it. The claim that infinity places itself in the finite, an idea he inherits from Descartes, is not stated explicitly until *Totality and Infinity*.

The main task of 'On Escape' is not to offer alternatives to being, nor to explain what is involved in escaping being. *He is trying to renew the Heideggerian question of Being without confining it to the enterprise of ontology.* At this point in his thought, he considers the question of being as the heart of philosophy:

Therefore, the need for escape—whether filled with chimerical hopes or not, no matter!—leads us into the heart of philosophy. It allows us to renew the ancient problem of being qua being. What is the structure of pure being? Does it have the universality Aristotle conferred on it? Is it the ground and the limit of our preoccupations, as certain modern philosophers would have it? On the contrary, is it nothing else than the mark of a certain civilization, firmly established in the fait accompli of being and incapable of getting out of it? And, in these conditions, is *excedence* possible, and how would it be accomplished? What is the ideal of happiness and human dignity that it promises?¹¹

Heidegger's influence is clearly visible in this passage, and we can see that Levinas has little concern here about 'grounding' being in his notion of the 'beyond' because he views his project here as ontological. If an escape from being is truly possible, we must escape the Heideggerian approach and the language it uses; we must formulate a new understanding of Being. Nevertheless, Levinas' claim that philosophy is concerned primarily with the question of being immediately places him in the same tradition that Heidegger is part of. What Levinas will most notably contest in Heidegger is not the importance of the problem of being, but the very manner in which the problem should be understood. According to Levinas, Heidegger confuses the relation between being and

¹¹*On Escape*, 56.

beings, between existence and that which exists. This confusion is what I referred to earlier as the 'ontological difference'. Levinas' early thought strives to renew the problem of being by showing how existence precedes any particular existent and that it is possible to have pure being without an existent. This ontological separation between being and the existent destroys the link between the existent and the world that we find in Heidegger and also questions whether Husserl's notion of intuition is as primordial as Husserl would like to have it.

Returning to the question of escape, what forces us to seek escape? To answer this question, Levinas provides an analysis of need, a term which could be understood in two ways: 1) the negative sense where need is a lack and is vanquished by satisfaction; 2) the positive sense that has no object of satisfaction except excedence itself. The negative sense of need comes in a form of a lack that can be satisfied; it has a *telos* or end¹². The satisfaction of a negative need is always temporary and it always returns, like hunger. Moreover, negative satisfactions do not satiate the ontological or positive need, which has no *telos*. Positive needs, like pleasure, have no destination and its insatiability always ends in a disappointment, which Levinas calls 'shame'. The feeling of pleasure tries to break through the ontological need but it always fails because pleasure, as a dynamic activity, comes to an end. Pleasure always ends in failure because we find ourselves back in being. Positive need may be understood as an 'ontological' need but this is not a need for ontology but the need to escape it. Ontological need, then, is a suffering because of the painful relapse into shame effected by pleasure. The distinction here between positive and negative need will, in *Totality and Infinity*, evolve into a distinction between need and

¹²Levinas' distinction between positive and negative need is strikingly similar to Heidegger's distinction between fear and anxiety. For Heidegger, fear has an object but anxiety does not. Remember, however, that Heidegger's anxiety is not meant to be an escape from Being, but is the essential ontological mood of *Dasein*.

desire, where the former is understood strictly in terms of the Same. Moreover, the notion of desire in the work from 1961 is cautiously called ‘metaphysical’, not ontological. It is clear that in 1935 Levinas thinks of escape as an ontological problem, while at the same time questioning ontology itself. In *Existence and Existents* we find that the escape from being is not something accomplished only by reformulating the question of the meaning of being, but also by rigorously reevaluating the place of Heideggerian ontology.

Nevertheless, ‘On Escape’ and *Existence and Existents* present the break from Being as something the human will must accomplish, while in later works Levinas insists that the escape from ontology, as ethics, is something that we passively undergo. His talk of suffering in ‘On Escape’ does foreshadow his later notion of pure passivity but it is a suffering that calls for an act on our part. It is the ‘I’ who has to escape. As I will show throughout the thesis, Levinas’ philosophy evolves in such a way that the need to ‘act’ is downplayed, only to be grounded in a passivity that refuses to be understood in terms of Being.

The recognition that the notion of escape may be illusory anticipates his later problem of how to state the ethical relation to the other without falling into the ontological realm of propositions and statements. This is the problem of how to formulate a Saying that is not reduced to a Said. In ‘On Escape’, Levinas has not yet presented the relation between ontology and its ‘otherwise’ in such a way that the former is grounded in the other. The ‘beyond’ is not yet an ‘activity’ in any sense. He has not yet explicitly acknowledged the problem of language in expressing the significance of the Other. In the next section, I will show how his two major works succeeding this early text are still attempts to construct an anti-Heideggerian understanding of being and are thus provisional for his later works where he will focus more on ethics. In these later texts, we are presented with a more radical interpretation of the Other, and we see Levinas moving

away from an active notion of escape and moving more toward a passive understanding of the relation between Self and Other.

1.5 *Existence and Existents*: Hypostasis and duality

Levinas begun writing *Existence and Existents* while he was in captivity during the Second World War and finally published the manuscript in 1947. It is unsurprising that here we find descriptions of what is like to live off the earth and to have the need to find a place to rest and sleep. This is the work of a man experiencing wartime. This work contains phenomenological analyses of insomnia, horror and fatigue. However, phenomenology, as the description of experience as it appears to the subject, cannot provide an analysis of pure being because experience only provides us with particulars. Levinas already has a particular conception of phenomenology's limits, and these restrictions will carry over into 'Time and the Other', an essay which also appeared in 1947.

Levinas' preface to *Existence and Existence* sheds light on the provisional nature of this early text and the method it adopts:

The study we present here is a preparatory one. It examines a certain number of broader research topics concerning the problem of the Good, time, and the relationship with the other as a movement toward the Good. The Platonic formula that situates the Good beyond Being serves as the general guideline for this research – but does not make up its content. It signifies that the movement which leads an existent toward the Good is not a transcendence by which that existent raises itself up to a higher existence, but a departure from Being and from the categories which describe it: an *ex-cendence*. But excendence and the Good necessarily have a foothold in Being, and that is why Being is better than non-being.

The theme of the present work is limited to this position in Being. Our exposition cannot, however, hide the perspectives within which it is situated, and it constantly anticipates developments reserved for a subsequent work.¹³

¹³*Existence and Existents*, 15.

We can see that some of the language has been carried over from 'On Escape' such as ex-cendence, the notions need and desire, and the distinction between existence and existents. The notion of the Good, on the other hand, now strikes us as a new concern in Levinas' thought. The Good is also linked with ex-cendence, a move which he will not relinquish in his later thought. He now has a more developed notion of what lies beyond ontology, and we can tell that it is an activity that has a 'foothold in being', as he puts it. It is an activity in that it makes time possible by freeing the subject from the repetitive instants of the present. It has a foothold in being because the Other is always revealed through a particular person, through an existent who refuses to be understood by finite concepts. The latter part of the text sets out to illustrate how ex-cendence and Good have such a foothold in Being by showing how the Other enters the solipsist scene of the lonely subject. The analysis of the Other, however, is left for a future work.

For the first time in his major writings, time becomes an important issue for Levinas, though not to the extent it does in *Totality and Infinity*. He dedicates much of the essay to describing how the lonely ego lives in the pulsing instant with no conception of past or future. This ego exists within the mass of the impersonal *there is*, the same brute existence that characterizes Being in 'On Escape'. He focuses on contents such as insomnia, fatigue and indolence as ways that the existent takes up the burden of existing.

The need to escape is also present here and is once again characterized by the necessity of doing something:

One has to do something, one has to aspire after and undertake. In spite of the false smile of the complete skeptic who, having suspended his judgments, abstains from acting and from aspiring to anything, the obligation of this contract remains incumbent on us like an inevitable "one must." It animates the need to act and to undertake, makes that necessity poignant. Weariness is the impossible refusal of this ultimate obligation. In weariness we want to escape existence itself, and not only one of its landscapes, in a longing for more beautiful skies. 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.¹⁴

There is a need to do something, a need to act and undertake. This must be done for its own sake and not for the sake of some other end. In 'On Escape' Levinas suggests that it is pleasure that tries to break the barriers of need, but he now claims that it is weariness – the burden of existence – that pressures us to escape. This weariness reveals itself as the hope for a better future, a hope that cannot be realized without the Other.

The idea of pure being, or the *Il y a*, is the highlight of Levinas' early work. Remembering that 'On Escape' may be read as a treatise on the body, the French 'Il y a' carries connotations of appropriation and accommodation that the English translation loses. The significance of the body, as the possessed and the possessing, is carried over into the phenomenological analyses of *Existence and Existents*. To escape being is to escape the body; Heidegger's ontology does not speak of such an escape. In contrast to Heidegger's ontological difference, the link between Being and beings, Levinas thinks of existence without appeal to existents¹⁵. Levinas separates being and world – which for Heidegger are inseparable – and claims that the 'there is' is actually prior to the appearance of any particular existent. He speaks of the 'there is' as a general being where no particular substantive has yet been determined. The 'there is' is pure indeterminacy, it is not derived from a particular being, and it submerges every particular being and is anonymous. One may doubt and suspend as Husserl and Descartes do, but the 'there is' always remains. The 'there is' is Being in general and as such it is 'full' or 'perfect'. Pure being is also tautological in that the 'to-be' refers only to itself and not to any particular existent. In addition, as Adriaan Peperzak points out, the *there is* is not to be understood

¹⁴*Existence and Existents*, 24-5.

¹⁵It is also worth reminding the reader that Levinas prefers the terms 'existence' and 'existents' over Heidegger's 'being' and 'beings'. Moreover, Levinas' 'existent' is usually a human subject.

as a totality because it is pure activity without any end¹⁶. The *there is* is always more than itself because to understand it 'in general' risks reducing it to an object, which it is not. Accordingly, we can see that Levinas' desire to overcome the totality of Being is visible in his very reformulation of the meaning of Being.

Now, to possess consciousness is to have a name and to be torn away from the 'there is'; it is to become a substantive. The relationship of the existent to the 'there is' is one of horror because it is something we cannot escape and it threatens to engulf us in anonymity. This horror is not an anxiety of nothingness that we find in Heidegger, but the horror of being itself; not a 'fear for' but a 'fear of'. Levinas likens this horror of the *Il y a* to the nighttime where no particular being is seen, yet one feels the energy of existence around oneself. Night is also to be understood in contrast to light because the 'there is' is prior to epistemology. Moreover, in contrast to Heidegger's *es gibt*, there is no generosity in the *Il y a*. As Levinas says, "There is a pain in Being."¹⁷ This 'pain' was also evident in 'On Escape' where pleasure always end in disappointment.

The appearance of an entity as a tearing-away from the 'there is' what Levinas calls '*hypostasis*', the movement of the verbal 'there is' into a substantive. As Taminiaux points out succinctly, hypostasis is to be contrasted with Heidegger's *ekstasis*: the former is concerned with the present and a constant rebirth while the latter is concerned with the future and death¹⁸. Thus when Levinas speaks of the 'stance' of the existent, he is deliberately removing the 'ek' from Heidegger's 'ek-stasis' and restricting being in general to the present. Since it is hypostasis that links the 'there is' with consciousness, the 'there is' may be understood as a pre-ontological situation prior to Heidegger's 'Being-in the-

¹⁶ Adriaan Peperzak, 'Some Remarks on Hegel, Kant, and Levinas', in *Face to Face with Levinas*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (New York: State University of New York Press, 1985), 208.

¹⁷ *Existence and Existents*, 23.

¹⁸ Jacques Taminiaux, "The early Levinas' reply to Heidegger's Fundamental Ontology", *Philosophy and Social Criticism* (vol 23, no. 6, 1997: 29-49), 44-47.

world’.

Through hypostasis, the existent is wrenched from being. There is a certain freedom involved with being an existent. The existent possesses existence as an attribute, as something it can master. This freedom finds itself limited because the existent cannot separate itself from Being. The existent wrenches itself from existence only to return to it. This reality of possessing Being and being possessed by Being is understood as the paradox of the duality of the existent. In the need to escape, existence reveals itself as a burden of the present rather than as a Heideggerian project oriented toward the future. By separating existence from the world, Levinas is able to claim that each project in the world involves taking up being, or interpreting it, in a certain way. The question ‘What is being?’ cannot be answered precisely because of this separation between existence and world, for all actions and beginning already presuppose the plenitude and anonymity of pure being.

Now, it must be emphasized that Levinas’ notions of the ‘there is’, ‘hypostasis’, and the relation between ‘existence’ and ‘existents’ are *not* to be interpreted as components of a new ontology as a totality offered by Levinas. While something can be said for his concern with ontology in 1935, Levinas is *not* doing ontology in 1947, at least not in the sense of offering a new unity. Levinas is not presenting a new reinterpretation of the harmony between man and world, but is in fact trying to show that all attempts to totalize the relation between man and world must first presuppose the independence of sheer being from the world. If ontology is understood merely as the attempt to reformulate the question of being, then Levinas is indeed doing that here, but with an awareness that this new being-hypostasis-existent structure allows for the possibility of an escape because being itself is not a totality. The ‘there is’ is not a totality because it is pure surplus, always more than itself. And, as we will see in a moment, his notions of

need and dual existence already suggest that the Heideggerian correlation between *Sein* and *Dasein* does not allow for such an escape.

The notion of desire is used by Levinas as a way of separating his notion of human existence from Heidegger's. In the essay of 1947 desire is understood in terms of food and nourishment. Everydayness is no longer understood as an inauthentic mode of existence. Desire is sincere. Food is not for the sake of living, it *is* living. There is no conflict here between everydayness and authenticity. For Levinas, the experiences of need and solitude are not deficient modes of experience, but contain an innocence. In his later works, this innocence will be contrasted with the guilt associated with ethics, where the self is always guilty before the Other. For the purposes of this thesis, I emphasize here that his analysis of the existent – the experiences associated with solitude and the instant – is not inferior or simply derivative of ethics. Even in his later works the notion of existence he presents here has an irreducible and crucial place in his thought. I intend to elaborate on the importance of his notion of Being for his later work when I discuss *Otherwise than Being* in the third chapter of the thesis.

Ontology is understood in terms of solitude and in this respect Levinas agrees with Heidegger. Unlike Heidegger, Levinas is able to escape from solitude by introducing the Other as that which rescues the existent from the instant. As I mentioned earlier, existence is that which the existent possesses and cannot escape. The need to escape, as one side of the duality of the existent, is now restated by Levinas in a detail that 'On Escape' lacks. As Jacques Rolland points out regarding 'On Escape', Levinas discusses leaving being and then moves to other themes only to return to the original theme of escape. This repetition is also present in *Existence and Existents* in that Levinas understands hypostasis as the tearing-away from existence and then a return to the horror of being. It is the burden of existence that leads the existent of *Existence and Existents* to

the need for escape. This need is an eschatological hope, a hope for a future that ontology cannot provide and that can only be addressed by the arrival of Other. Inter-subjectivity is announced as the eschatological promise for happiness and human dignity that Levinas spoke of in the preface. The relationship with the Other, moreover, introduces concepts such as time, which cannot be derived from the pulsing instants of solitude:

The dialectic of time is the very dialectic of the relationship with the other, that is, a dialogue which in turn has to be studied in terms other than those of the dialectic of the solitary subject. The dialectic of the social relationship will furnish us with a set of concepts of a new kind. And the nothingness necessary to time, which the subject cannot produce, comes from the social relationship.¹⁹

Notwithstanding Levinas' strange use of the term 'dialectic' and its relation to the phenomenological method, which we will examine when we look at 'Time and the Other', we can now see a development where the relationship with the 'Other' is a certain kind of activity that furnishes new concepts and produces time. Temporality cannot be produced by the existent alone. We can see that the escape from ontology is not something that the existent alone can perform.

Existence and Existents may be viewed as an essay that accomplishes what 'On Escape' fails to: a detailed analysis of how the ontological situation leads to the need to escape and what exactly this escape involves. Granted, 'On Escape' does not locate the 'beyond ontology' in the social sphere, but both works struggle with the problem of how to understand the notion of going beyond ontology, of going beyond systematic thought. And, like his earlier work, the essay from 1945 provides an analysis of the ego as it is rooted in the solitude of the instant, describes its moods and dispositions, and understands these affective states as ways in which the ego has a relationship with being such that pure existence need not have a world. As we will see in the next section, 'Time and the Other'

¹⁹*Existence and Existents*, 93-4.

shares a similar method but it goes even further in trying to describe how the Other is beyond ontology. In the next section I will be focusing directly on Levinas' method and why it has now become a main concern for him.

1.6 'Time and the Other': Method and Dialectic

'Time and the Other' was given as a series of four lectures during 1946 and 1947. His later book *Totality and Infinity*, which appeared in 1961, presents a more careful and, dare I say, systematic treatment of the main themes of his thought. The relation between 'Time and the Other' and the work from 1961 is, in my view, a matter of debate. Hugh Miller claims that the work from 1961 "carries with modifications" the arguments of 'Time and the Other'. While Levinas' goals in the two works are similar in many respects, they both differ greatly methodologically, for the work from 1961 drops the term 'dialectic'. It thus appears that Levinas has always sensed what he has wanted to achieve, namely to illustrate the significance of the Other, but until *Totality and Infinity* he has been struggling with the name to describe his method. One possible reason for this struggle is that Levinas' preoccupation with escaping Heideggerian ontology has posed a problem for his relation to phenomenology. Is it possible to escape Heidegger while holding on to phenomenology? Or is the escape from ontology necessarily an escape from phenomenology? A complete answer to these questions demands that we look at Levinas' relation to Husserl, which, as I stated earlier, we cannot do here. Levinas' dissatisfaction with the 'term' dialectic is closely related to his need to stay with the concrete, rather than engaging in abstract metaphysics. As *Totality and Infinity* presents it, metaphysics is not an abstract way of philosophizing but is the most concrete activity in which the ethical encounter is experienced.

Nevertheless, in 'Time and the Other', Levinas declares his method of 'dialectic':

The analyses I am about to undertake will not be anthropological but ontological. I do believe in the existence of ontological problems and structures, but not in the sense that realists—purely and simply describing given being—ascribe to ontology. It is a matter of affirming that *being* is not an empty notion, that it has its own dialectic; and that notions like solitude and collectivity belong to a certain moment of this dialectic and are not merely psychological notions, like the need one can have for the Other or, implied in this need, like a prescience, presentiment, or anticipation of the other. I want to present solitude as a category of being, to show its place in a dialectic of being, or rather—because the word “dialectic” has a more determinate meaning—to show the place of solitude in the general economy of being.²⁰

The term ‘dialectic’, which we have seen used in *Existence and Existents*, is critical for understanding Levinas’ early works. In *Totality and Infinity* and the later works he reproaches the term perhaps because of its Hegelian overtones of synthetical unification. The Other, for instance, cannot be mediated by an impersonal term or process. In the work from 1961, Levinas prefers the term ‘phenomenology’ over ‘dialectic’. In *Existence and Existence*, phenomenology is useful only insofar as it is used to describe certain existential dispositions of the subject. Regarding Levinas’ method in *Existence and Existents*, Alphonso Lingis writes:

This inquiry is phenomenological, in the sense that it proceeds by a descriptive effort to get at the essence – the inner process – of phenomena as they show themselves to the mode of subjectivity first receptive to them. And in the sense that those modes of subjectivity themselves have to be elucidated by reliving them attentively. Yet if the reflective work is itself thematizing and objectifying, the preobjective, nocturnal and elemental format of Being will elude it; it will still be available to the constituted consciousness only as a memory of something interrupted and escaped.²¹

The ‘inner process’ refers to the experiences that take place within the capsule of Being. Such experiences are lived, but Being in general precedes these experiences and the objects that they reveal. Phenomenology can only work within experience (whatever experience may be) and Levinas adopts a particular notion of ‘dialectic’ in order to

²⁰Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 39.

²¹*Existence and Existents*, 11.

describe what takes place outside of experience, that is, outside the reach of phenomenology.

By 'dialectic', Levinas does not mean what Hegel means by the term nor does he mean a process by which disparate objects of some kind are brought together via an impersonal synthesizing activity:

The dialectic these developments may contain is any case not Hegelian. It is not a matter of traversing a series of contradictions, or of reconciling them while stopping History. On the contrary, it is toward a pluralism that does not merge into a unity that I should like to make my way and, if this can be dared, break with Parmenides.²²

This 'pluralism' also separates Levinas from his great teachers Husserl and Heidegger, both of whom Levinas understands as presenting 'unities'. As Hugh Miller suggests, Levinas' notion of dialectic is closer to Kant's in that he is employing the concepts of ontology to objects beyond their proper sphere²³. Like Kant's antinomies, dialectic results in incompatible positions. The duality of existence is one such antinomy that we find in Levinas. Moreover, existence and the existent cannot be understood as a unity any more than the relation between the self and the Other can be understood as such. Unlike Heidegger, Levinas does not use the distinction between Being and beings as a starting-point, but begins with the world-less 'there is'. He uses the term 'dialectic' to express the 'general economy of being' and of how anonymous existence gives rise to existence. The activity of hypostasis, as a metaphysical idea, cannot be explained as a physical process:

Consciousness is a rupture of the anonymous vigilance of the *there is*; it is already hypostasis; it refers to a situation where an existent is put in touch with its existing. Obviously I will not be able to explain *why* this takes place. There is no physics in

²²*Time and the Other*, 43.

²³Hugh Miller, "Phenomenology, Dialectic, and Time in Levinas's *Time and the Other*", *Philosophy Today* (Summer 1996, 219-234), 231.

metaphysics. I can simply show what the significance of hypostasis is.²⁴

While it is obvious here that he does not have the precise understanding of metaphysics presented in *Totality and Infinity*, it is clear that it refers to something that lies outside the reach of phenomenological analysis. Phenomenology aims at what is directly accessible in vision, and thus the anonymity of pure being – the night that is impervious to light – always escapes the method of direct seeing. To see, to thematize, is always to thematize a particular, never being in general.

Existence and Existents also shares some dissatisfactions with the phenomenological method and the term ‘dialectic’ is also used there. Many of the same themes are covered by both works from 1947: the activity of hypostasis, solitude, the distinction between existence and existents, and the character of time. *Existence and Existents* is intended to give descriptions of different ways of taking up being, not to provide an analysis of how the Other is the source of time. The importance of the Other as the source of time is of foremost importance in ‘Time and the Other’: “The aim 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.”²⁵ With the relation between time and the Other as a central concern, there is more pressure on Levinas to describe what goes beyond the experience of the subject in the instant.

What is relevant for us here, however, is not the importance given to time but the role ontology still has in his thought. I contend that Levinas is still concerned with offering a certain re-interpretation of ontology in ‘Time and the Other’, and does not begin to move from this reformulation of the question of Being, and on to ethics, until he

²⁴ *Time and the Other*, 51.

²⁵ *Time and the Other*, 39.

reaches *Totality and Infinity*. Still, we must be careful in saying that Levinas is doing ontology in these early works if we accept Levinas' definition of ontology as a philosophical enterprise that seeks to formulate a harmony between man and world. His re-interpretation of ontology seeks precisely to show how ontology *does* have a beyond. The later work from 1961 is peculiar because he still hangs on to the ideas of his previous works and tries to give a more detailed analysis of the relation with the Other. The seeds for the conflict between the text and communication are already planted in his earlier works, but in this early period he is concerned with offering a *provisional* account of ontology *before* moving on to an analysis of the ethical encounter. In addition, the early Levinas appears to be constantly reevaluating the relation between his reformulation of the question of being and phenomenology, and his reluctance to embrace the term 'phenomenology' in his early works is a testimony to this concern. In *Totality and Infinity* phenomenology and ontology are both methods that try to unify their objects, and both are opposed to metaphysics.

Miller may be correct in asserting that *Totality and Infinity* is a modification of the arguments presented in 'Time and the Other', but it is the change in Levinas' method that makes such a modification possible. The term 'dialectic' is no longer used and the relation between phenomenology and ontology is carefully delineated. The main consistency between *Existence and Existent*, 'Time and the Other', and *Totality and Infinity* is the clear emphasis on the origin of the 'future' as originating in ontology's 'beyond'. Solitude only exposes the subject to the punctual 'instant', but the encounter with the Other gives rise to a 'future' which is often referred to as 'messianic eschatology'. Now, as Miller also points out, Levinas' later work drops all talk of the 'future' and focuses more on the past and I think this has to do with the inability of phenomenology to speak for the future and Levinas' later insistence that phenomenology can uncover conditions that the notion

of time itself must presuppose. These conditions are understood in terms of an 'immemorial past' that precedes any past-tense of time. In other words, to speak of the Other in terms of the future may suggest that the Other has a place in the temporal order, but Levinas' claim that 'metaphysics precedes ontology' – that desire for alterity precedes the desire for a harmony – demands that the Other not be understood temporally. And, just as this 'immemorial past' is not itself within the structure of time, the claim 'metaphysics precedes ontology' cannot be understood in terms of temporality. This concern of how to understand the relation between the Same and Other will occupy us in the next chapter.

1.7 Conclusion

We have shown that Levinas' early work aims at offering a reformulation of the Heideggerian question of the meaning of Being. His early works may be considered 'ontology' only in the sense that it deals with the issue of how to understand the relation between existence and existents, but this ontology is not intended to present another 'harmony', but to open the possibility of an escape. His early themes such as escape, desire and the 'there is' are all attempts to develop a new understanding of being that is not Heideggerian. Levinas accomplishes this break from Heidegger through the separation between Being and world. Now that he has developed his notion of being, his works will concentrate more on the Other and how it is possible to have an ethics that does not do violence to the Other. Thus, we must ask a question: How is the existent affected by ethics? What is the validity of the existent and does it really have any independence from ethics? Did he provide all of these analyses just so that he can go beyond them in later works? Did he set up his reformulation of being just so that he can knock it down, like a child expressing his authority in the destruction of a sandcastle? Or

does the notion of Being have a significance that his ethics requires? Throughout the rest of the thesis I will argue that Levinasian ethics needs ontology in order to be valid, that is, communicable. Ontology, in effect, is the place where ethics is carried, the site in which my responsibility for the other is enacted.

Chapter II

Subjectivity, Method and Communication: The Attempt to Go Beyond Ontology in *Totality and Infinity*

2.1 Introduction

This part of the thesis has three components: 1) to demonstrate that Levinas' notion of subjectivity and human existence is still a response to Heidegger and thus a reformulation of the question of Being; 2) to examine the relation between interiority and exteriority and to show that interiority, as subjectivity, holds a crucial place in Levinas' ethics; 3) to illustrate how the relation between interiority and exteriority cannot be understood conceptually because of the dependence on the language of interiority. The language of interiority cannot avoid reducing its objects to the Same, yet this language is necessary in order to communicate the significance of the Other. Language operates by using concepts and therefore fails to communicate the absolute otherness of the Other. The Other, I claim, needs the Same; ethics needs ontology.

2.2 *Totality and Infinity*: Method and Background

Published in 1961, *Totality and Infinity* is one of Levinas' main texts. It is his first attempt to present his thought as a whole. The work is not as systematic as it first appears. The table of contents is not very helpful since Levinas is careful not to present his work as a 'totality' but as an attempt to communicate the 'infinity' of the Other. Evidence of this includes the two prefaces that appear slapped together before the start of the book and the twelve Conclusions – in the plural – that end the book. The themes dealt with in *Totality and Infinity* are not developed systematically but are often picked up and dropped at various times, often without warning. As we will see later in this chapter, the

confusing method of *Totality and Infinity* presents the reader with a series of textual problems that makes the book as a totality difficult to comprehend. Of course, Levinas intended such problems to occur.

Totality and Infinity is the only text where Levinas spends approximately the same amount of time speaking of the Other as he does the Same. In the earlier texts, as we have seen, the idea of the Other does not enter the scene until later in the text. Even in the first half of the book where he talks about interiority and the Same, the Other and metaphysical desire often make their way into the discussion. Moreover, *Totality and Infinity* is not only a description of the existent on its way to ethics, but is a ‘defense of subjectivity’²⁶. This defense of subjectivity is heavily influenced by Descartes’ founding of subjectivity in the *Meditations*. In the preface to the German edition of *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas writes: “But in the discourse of *Totality and Infinity*, we have not forgotten the memorable fact that, in his third *Meditations of First Philosophy*, Descartes encountered a thought, a noesis, which was not on the scale of its noema, its cogitatum.”²⁷ Like Descartes, Levinas wishes to show that the subject is founded on the idea of infinity. Levinas’s subject, then, has two main components: 1) egoism and the resistance to totality; 2) the subject as constituted by the idea of infinity. The subject Levinas wishes to defend is ethical and is not to be understood as a cognitive ego searching for truth. To defend subjectivity is not to defend the Same because his task is to show that the subject has a more fundamental relation with Infinity or the Other. This subject is indeed a consciousness, but it is an ethical consciousness. Precisely, Levinas places the good over the true and beautiful. The Other is not ‘truer’ than the Same, but is *better*. When

²⁶Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonse Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969): 26.

²⁷On *Thinking-of-the-Other: Entre Nous*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998): 200.

Levinas says 'metaphysics precedes ontology', he means that ontology will always fail at achieving what metaphysics accomplishes, or *desires* to accomplish. We will speak of this 'desire' later.

The relation between totality and infinity can be expressed by resorting to other dualisms: Same and Other, ontology and ethics, war and peace, interiority and exteriority. As the title indicates, Levinas is not offering a choice between totality or infinity. He wishes to emphasize this 'and' that connects them. But we must be careful. This 'and' does not unite totality and infinity as a unity. The conjunction is intended to express difference. Nor is Levinas favouring infinity over ontology by reversing priorities, because he would then be offering another totality. We are not dealing with a scenario like 'ethics versus ontology' because ethics and ontology are both essential features of human existence and rely fundamentally on each other. Hence Peter Sedgwick's title 'Levinas: The Ethical Versus the Ontological'²⁸ fails to say enough about the relation between totality and infinity, and it implies a conflict between the two that may be deceiving. As I will show shortly, ontology has an irreducible place in Levinas' ethics and is not to be understood as the antithesis of ethics.

2.3 *Totality and Infinity*: Sameness and Being

In this section, I will plant the seeds for our later discussion on the relation between interiority and exteriority by treating Levinas' notion of subjectivity in *Totality and Infinity*. His commitment to offering a defense of subjectivity places him squarely within the Cartesian tradition, for he will argue in *Totality and Infinity* that the subject is founded on the idea of Infinity. This committal to subjectivity poses problems for

²⁸Peter Sedgwick, *Descartes to Derrida: An Introduction to European Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 178.

Levinas' method because he seeks to defend subjectivity while at the same time trying to show how the Other, as infinity, is prior to the Same. How can language *state* the non-conceptual if it cannot avoid conceptualizing the objects it seeks to describe? This very question will be the driving issue in the next couple of sections of the thesis, where I will claim that Levinas' adherence to subjectivity forces him to struggle with a subjective language that always betrays the absolute otherness of the Other. The project of *Totality and Infinity*, I will argue, fails on account of precisely this problem with language. I will refer to certain problems in the text itself to support my case. I will continue now by looking at the distinction between Same and Other in the text from 1961 and how it relates to Levinas' early project to escape Heideggerian ontology.

The term 'Same' [*la Même*] carries all the weight of Levinas' earlier critiques of ontology. In the text from 1961, the Same refers to ontology as the enterprise that tries to establish a totality. By establishing a totality or harmony we have mastery over the things around us. We name things, give them a place, and use them to our own advantage. Ontology is essentially the quest for power and domination, and it reveals itself most purely in war – where ethics, as beyond ontology, is suspended. The Other is that which cannot be named or possessed. I cannot make the Other *mine*. Levinas thinks ontology has most often been epistemology because of philosophy's attempts to account for man's relation with the world in terms of knowledge. Epistemology, under the rubric of ontology, reduces all objects to the Same, to the unity of 'what is known'. Levinas does not question the importance of epistemology but claims that ethics has always been done in its shadow. In other words, ontology as epistemology reduces the ethical Other to the ontological Same. The problem of Heidegger's ontological difference, with the superiority of Being over beings, is philosophy's latest attempt (in Levinas' time) to reduce inter-subjectivity to a category of Being.

At first glance, Levinas' thought may appear clear and simple: he is opposing the idea of a totalizing ontology in favour of an ethical metaphysics that preserves the otherness of the Other. Unfortunately, his thought is not that simple. Although Levinas is careful to distinguish between totality and infinity, we encounter problems when trying to understand how they both play a role in the constitution of Levinas' ethical subject. In his quest to found the self in the idea of Infinity, Levinas claims that subjectivity 'begins with' enjoyment. The nature of this 'beginning' is problematic to readers of Levinas' work because we are always reminded that he says elsewhere that the subject as enjoyment already has the idea of infinity. As we will see later, the notion of 'beginning' is also problematic because of its temporal implications. Levinas' intentions are betrayed by the words he writes: his Saying becomes reduced to a Said²⁹.

We must understand Levinas' notion of subjectivity as enjoyment as his attempt to free the subject from epistemology even at the level of pre-ethical existence. In enjoyment, the ego is confronted with objects that it makes its own, such as food. Such objects can become objects of representation, that is, items of knowledge, but the subject's relation to them as enjoyment is beyond such categories. Subjectivity as enjoyment is prior to any distinction between theory and practice.

As enjoyment, subjectivity is separated from the world. The subject relates to the world in terms of need. In need, foreign objects are brought under the Same. In enjoyment objects become mine and the ego is closed up like a capsule and takes itself as a totality. It knows no exteriority and takes itself as absolute, although it cannot 'think' this absolute. For Levinas, to think is to be able to think beyond totality, and such thinking requires the idea of infinity. Levinas sees enjoyment as ultimately insecure. As in his

²⁹The distinction between 'Saying' and 'Said' will be one of the main concerns of the next chapter.

earlier works, the insecurity of the existent involves hope for the future, a hope that sensibility cannot quench but one that it gives rise to. This 'hope' is the desire for Otherness, a desire which is now a reformulation of his earlier notion of subjectivity as a longing to escape from Being.

There is a connection between subjectivity and enjoyment that is absent from the early works. The early Levinas speaks of burdens and pains in being, but *Totality and Infinity* understands enjoyment as 'the very pulsation of the I' where subjectivity originates³⁰. In enjoyment we are happy. In his earlier works Levinas describes the act of 'beginning' in the pre-ethical dealings with the world. In this later work happiness, as the fulfilment of needs, is the condition for such beginnings. This happiness is not a psychological state and does not have an inter-subjective element. Rather, this is the happiness of an existent in solitude who is caught up in the world of satiety, where as soon as one need is satisfied in one pulsing instant another need arises.

We remember, of course, that it is the Other who brings the existent out of the instant and thus out of the realm of need. This is where the notion of desire enters. For Levinas, desire is a longing for otherness, a longing that cannot be satiated and cannot be understood as the process of bringing the Other under the Same. Levinas uses the term 'metaphysics' to express this longing, a longing that indicates an absolute separation between Same and Other. Desire feeds off itself and has no direct object. Desire desires an Otherness that can never be present to consciousness.

Although interiority takes itself as a totality, the dimension of need is not strictly ontological because enjoyment is a break from being. In enjoyment, the subject is already beyond being because the categories of 'act', 'potency', 'theory', or 'practice' cannot be

³⁰*Totality and Infinity*, 113.

used to understand enjoyment. Accordingly, the subject cannot be defined. It is wise of Levinas to admit that at the level of brute existence the ego cannot be defined. For if he did not admit it there, he would risk doing ontology by purporting to define the 'whole' of the existent. On the other hand, he is not saying that the self does not have an identity. The self goes through many events at the level of natural existence and throughout these changes the self still remains invariably the 'same'³¹. This 'sameness' escapes definition. Moreover, since happiness is beyond being in that it eludes definition, the pre-ethical subject is already beyond ontology. It is a generalization to say that the book begins with ontology and then arrives at ethics; such a claim ignores Levinas' attempt to escape ontology even at the level of pre-ethical existence.

When Levinas claims 'metaphysics precedes ontology', he is saying that ultimately the desire for absolute otherness precedes all knowledge and all need to assimilate otherness into the Same. When we seek to assimilate the Other, we are already presupposing that we recognize it *as* Other. Now, we may attempt to interpret Levinas' claim as also saying 'ethics precedes ontology', but I think this would be an inaccurate substitution in this context. Metaphysics and ethics are not synonymous terms because Levinas understands the latter as effecting the movement of the former³².

In the encounter with the Other, interiority is turned inside-out: its totality is surprised by the infusion of the idea of infinity and its solitude is preceded by a more fundamental inter-subjectivity. Now, a few questions must be posed. What does it mean to say that metaphysics 'precedes' ethics? What kind of priority is this? Logical? Temporal? How is interiority preserved in the encounter with the Other? Why is interiority necessary for exteriority? And, if metaphysics precedes ethics, then why has Levinas'

³¹This quantitative notion of selfhood can be understood as a tree that grows and yet remains the same *one* tree despite all its physical alterations.

³²*Totality and Infinity*, 29.

works begun first with the 'pre-ethical' state of existence? Does the term 'pre-ethical' even make sense if ethics precedes ontology?

2.4 The Necessity of Interiority for Exteriority

Addressing the importance of interiority for exteriority, Levinas writes:

Egoism, enjoyment, sensibility, and the whole dimension of interiority—the articulations of separation—are necessary for the idea of Infinity, the relation with the Other which opens forth from the separated and finite being. Metaphysical Desire, which can be produced only in a separated, that is, enjoying, egoist, and satisfied being, is then not derived from enjoyment. But if the separated, that is, sentient being is necessary for the production of infinity and exteriority in metaphysics, its constitution as thesis or antithesis, within a dialectical play, would destroy this exteriority. The infinite does not raise up the finite by opposition. Just as the interiority of enjoyment is not deducible from the transcendental relation, the transcendental relation is not deducible from the separated being as a dialectical antithesis forming a counterpart to the subjectivity, as union forms the counterpart of distinction among two terms of any relation.³³

This long passage contains many key ideas essential for understanding the relation between interiority and exteriority. First, the idea of infinity opens up *from* the separate being, indicating once again that interiority precedes exteriority in some sense. It is not derived from enjoyment because enjoyment is concerned only with 'living from' as need. To say that interiority is 'necessary' for exteriority is not to speak of the two terms as components of a Hegelian dialectic; there is no synthesis here. In dropping the term 'dialectic', the method presented in 'Time and the Other' has been revised so that no such misunderstandings about the relation between Same and Other arise.

Levinas claims that interiority, which takes itself as a totality, is 'surprised' and 'questioned' by the Other. This surprising and questioning, Levinas also claims, are a revelation. Trying to understand the relation between interiority and exteriority by using

³³*Totality and Infinity*, 148.

the notion of revelation is a tricky affair mainly because whatever words we choose to employ do not give the revelation, as the appearance of the Other, its proper respect. Levinas chooses the word 'Face' [*le visage*] to express the revelation of the Other, but this term, as commentators have noted, comes with problems of its own³⁴. The term 'Face' certainly does not refer to a particular face we see in the empirical world, yet at the same time the term it is inseparable from those we encounter there. It does appear as an existent insofar as each revelation of a face takes place in an encounter with a person, but this is not an object that we perceive and take as an item of knowledge. The Face is not disclosed by us but is *revealed* to us. The encounter with the Face is not something the subject effects from his will. The Face is an experience that cannot be contained within the (interior) consciousness of the subject. We are left with these questions: how is the revelation of the Other, as the revelation of exteriority, effected? How does the lonely ethical subject of interiority become an ethical subject?

Already we can see that the need to 'act' and 'do something' is slowly being eliminated from Levinas' thought. Levinas is here establishing his ethics as one that relies on a certain understanding of passivity that is prior to activity. In *Otherwise than Being*, he will develop this passivity by speaking of a 'pure passivity' that is prior to the very distinction between activity and passivity. This passivity implies that interiority taken as a totality has some kind of 'place' that allows for the revelation of the other. Levinas speaks of interiority as 'open' and 'closed'. It is closed in the sense that it is like a capsule that takes itself as a totality. It is open, on the other hand, because it is able to welcome the idea of infinity and exteriority. The open nature of interiority, I think, is made possible by Levinas' early notion of the duality of existence presented in *Existence and Existence*.

³⁴ See, for instance, Davis, Colin, *Levinas: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996): 46; Wyschogrod, Edith, *Emmanuel Levinas: The Problem of Ethical Metaphysics* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974): 82-85.

There, as we saw earlier, subjectivity is characterized by the possession of existence as a predicate and the simultaneous need to escape the sheer horror of the *Il y a*. In 1961 we see that such a need for escape is present in enjoyment through the desire for infinity. The duality of existence and subjectivity as enjoyment both have an ‘openness’ that allows for the revelation of the Other. Levinas explains:

In the separated being the door to the outside must hence be at the same time open and closed. The closedness of the separated being must be ambiguous enough for, on the one hand, the interiority necessary to the idea of infinity to remain *real* and not apparent only. . . If the dimension of interiority cannot belie its interiority by the apparition of a heterogeneous element in the course of this descent into itself along the path of pleasure . . . still in this descent a shock must be produced which, without inverting the movement of interiorization, without breaking the thread of interior substance, would furnish the *occasion* for a resumption of relations with exteriority. Interiority must be at the same time closed and open.³⁵

The opening is created precisely through the failure of enjoyment to exhaust all the needs of the human condition, most notably the need for an absolute Other. As in ‘On Escape’, pleasure finds itself in a difficult situation because it does not succeed in completely rescuing the ego from ontology. With each act of satisfaction, an other [*l’Autre*] is brought into the Same. In enjoyment, all otherness is assimilated into the totality. The life of enjoyment is one of insecurity precisely because of the recurrence of privation.

Levinas does not indicate whether the openness of interiority precedes its closedness, but it would be safe to assume that the ‘openedness’ does have some kind of priority³⁶ much in the same way that infinity has a priority over totality. This question of priority, of course, leads us into a similar difficulty of what it means to say that interiority is necessary for exteriority and that at the same time the Other is prior to the Same.

³⁵*Totality and Infinity*, 148-149.

³⁶The idea of the subject as ‘open’ quickly reminds of the ‘open’ nature of Husserl’s intentional consciousness. We must be reminded that Levinas’ sense of ‘open’ here is not epistemological, but ethical; not an openness to the possibility of truth, but to the possibility of the Good.

Paul Ricoeur challenges Levinas' notion of subjectivity, claiming that Levinas does not separate the 'I' from the 'self', and that Levinasian subjectivity is not defined by its capacity for discovery. Understanding Levinas' thought as 'hyperbole of excess', Ricoeur writes: "In truth, what the hyperbole of separation renders unthinkable is the distinction between self and I and the formation of a concept of selfhood defined by its openness and its capacity for discovery."³⁷ In Levinas' defense, Levinas distinguishes between 'open' and 'closed' interiority, and it is precisely the 'openness' – which is coincidentally Ricoeur's own word as well – that allows for the learning of something new, that is, the possibility of discovery. The duality of existence presented in Levinas' early work, which presents the subject as both possessing and being possessed by being, implies that subjectivity is at once an existent and otherwise than being. Ricoeur claims that "one has to grant a capacity for reception"³⁸ if interiority is essentially closed up and isolated. Levinas, as we have seen, does have such an opening. The 'I', or ego as totality, is precisely what this isolation is. The 'self', which is ethical, is made possible by the opening in interiority that allows for discovery and learning.

It is unclear what Ricoeur means when he says Levinas fails to distinguish between 'ipse' and 'idem'. For Ricoeur, 'idem' is understood as qualitative and quantitative permanence through time, like the tool that changes but remains the same, or the growing tree. Ricoeur's 'ipse', in contrast, is a narrative idea of the self that escapes any conceptual definition and must be understood as a life-story consisting of a particular interpretation of what a 'character' is. Would not Levinas view 'idem' identity as a totality and also view 'ipse' as an undefinable understanding of subjectivity (agreeing with Ricoeur)? The subject does undergo change and remains the same, thus fulfilling the

³⁷Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 339.

³⁸Ricoeur, 339.

requirements of 'idem' identity, but the relation with the Other adds another element to the subject that separates it from totality and idem-identity. This very relation with the Other – which is the source of ethical subjectivity – is itself a teaching, a capacity for discovery.

The encounter with the Other as a 'teaching' can also be understood as a 'shock' to interiority. This shock does not negate the I, however, but preserves it in its interiority. As Levinas puts it, the shock effected by the Other is not a 'violence' nor a physical resistance, but an ethical resistance. It preserves the identity of permanence over time while infusing the self with ethical responsibility. In responsibility, totality still has its value. In this initial shock, both the self and the Other maintain their respective identities. If the Other absorbed the I then we would have a totality. Levinas never claims that interiority is subsumed under ethics. In addition, saying 'metaphysics precedes ontology' does not imply that ontology is inauthentic. Ontology, as the enterprise of trying to establish a totality, has a certain validity that ethics does not negate nor render chimerical. The value of interiority, as it turns out, lies in its link with the concern for knowledge:

When the critical presence of the Other will call in question this egoism it will not destroy its solitude. Solitude will be recognized in the concern for *knowing*, which is formulated as a problem of origin—inconceivable in a totality. To this problem the notion of causality can bring no solution, since it is precisely a question of a *self*, a being absolutely isolated, whose isolation causality would compromise by reinstating it in a series . . . The solitude of the subject will be recognized also in the goodness in which the apology issues.³⁹

Solitude is preserved in the interest for knowledge, an interest that seeks for an other [*l'Autre*] to assimilate⁴⁰. It is the quest for knowledge that inspires the being of interiority to leave its capsule. The need for Otherness reveals itself as insatiable. Need becomes

³⁹*Totality and Infinity*, 119.

⁴⁰Once again, we must keep in mind Levinas' distinction between the assimilable 'other' [*Autre*] and the non-assimilable 'Other' [*Autrui*].

desire, a longing for that which may never arrive. Need, however, still has its validity. As he puts in his early works, there is still an innocence in need – there is nothing inauthentic about eating or enjoying a nice bath. This comfort with the world is not challenged by Levinas: “Interiority then discovers itself to be insufficient, but this insufficiency does not designate any limitation imposed by this exteriority.”⁴¹ Nevertheless, interiority becomes broken because it comes across an object that cannot be assimilated into the Same. The separated being of satisfaction reveals itself as insufficient in the face of exteriority. The separated being, in this search for Otherness, seeks for what may never arrive. This emphasis on the future reminds us of the eschatological hope mentioned in *Existence and Existence* where the subject, in its dual existence, desires to escape its own body in its thirst for the future.

Even though the Other is not an object to be known or assimilated into the Same, Levinas still views the Other as an existent. This is not to say that the Other is understood ontologically, because the existent has priority over being: “The notion of the face . . . signifies the philosophical priority of the existent over Being, an exteriority that does not call for power or possession⁴².” In an essay published ten years earlier, ‘Is Ontology Fundamental?’, Levinas says that the encounter with the Other involves both understanding and language. By understanding, Levinas is referring to the conscious act of thematization within the framework of Heideggerian ontology. The Other, Levinas claims there, “is a being and counts as such⁴³.” The Other, however, is not a mere object we encounter but someone – not a something – we address; not a ‘what’ but a ‘who’; not a ‘thing’ we talk about, but a ‘person’ we talk to. The Other is always encountered *as* a particular person with particular facial features. Understanding a person already

⁴¹*Totality and Infinity*, 179.

⁴²*Totality and Infinity*, 51.

⁴³*On Thinking-of-the-Other*, 5.

presupposes an awareness of a distinction between thing and person: “To understand a person is already to speak to him.”⁴⁴ Speaking with the Other, then, puts us on a plane that is beyond epistemology because the Other is not an object of knowledge but an ethical existent.

Although Levinas still speaks of the Other by using temporal language and claims ‘metaphysics precedes ontology’, we must note that in no way is Levinas maintaining that at some time t_1 an existent is in natural existence and at some later time t_2 the ethical moment takes place. The relation between interiority and exteriority cannot be understood temporally because Levinas understands the Other as the source of time itself. In his later work, Levinas recognizes the problem of speaking in temporal language and speaks of a ‘past’ that is prior to time, and an origin that is itself without any temporal beginning. In *Totality and Infinity* the language Levinas uses poses a problem for us because the method he uses betrays what he is trying to accomplish – he is trying to state the unsayable. What does this conflict between method and communication tell us about the relation between interiority and exteriority? How does one have a priority over the other?

Levinas hints at the actual state of human existence: “The description of enjoyment as it has been conducted to this point assuredly does not render the concrete man. In reality man has already the idea of infinity, that is, lives in society and represents things to himself.”⁴⁵ If man already has the idea of infinity then how is it possible, and acceptable, for Levinas to speak of interiority before the encounter with the Other? Levinas begins with an analysis of interiority and arrives at exteriority, but this is not a simple ‘before’ and ‘after’ series of events. Levinas uses temporal language, and thus risks ‘totalizing’ his

⁴⁴*On Thinking-of-the-Other*, 6.

⁴⁵*Totality and Infinity*, 139.

project, while at the same time struggling to communicate the absolute exteriority of the Other. As Cohen points out, the preface to the work, which was written after the work was completed, is an urgent attempt to ‘unsay’ the ‘Said’ of the work as a whole⁴⁶.

Before I defend my claim about the conflict between method and communication, and the notion of interiority in relation to it, something must be said about (dare I say) the logic of Levinas’ approach. When he says we are in reality social beings right from the start, he is saying that our experiences of enjoyment and sensibility are always already experienced with an awareness of ethics and the idea of infinity. The question of which comes first – ontology (Greek thought) or ethics (Judaism)?’, which Derrida asks in ‘Violence and Metaphysics’⁴⁷, thus becomes less important because they are both essential features of human existence and they cannot be understood by using such temporal language. The major flaw of *Totality and Infinity*, and his earlier works, I think, is this precise use of temporal language in his attempt to get beyond ontology. In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas begins straightaway with the Other and does not provide an analysis of the existent in solitude. This new method is a direct response to both Derrida’s criticisms of his language and of the faults he finds in the method of the work from 1961.

What has begun as my attempt to provide a systematic treatment of Levinas’ philosophy has evolved into a problem that Levinas himself faces: How do we use the text to communicate what cannot be expressed in mere words? Levinas goes to great lengths to show how interiority is founded on exteriority, yet he cannot escape the language of temporality and interiority. In the next section I will show how the fundamental problem of the relation between Same and Other, between ontology and ethics, reveals itself as the

⁴⁶ Cohen, Richard A., *Elevations: The Height of the Good in Rosenzweig and Levinas* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994): 224-225.

⁴⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), 153.

problem between method and communication. I will point out a host of inconsistencies in Levinas' work that puts the worth of Levinas' thought in question. Why value a philosophy that is inconsistent and unclear? The problem of textuality, which I think is closely related to Levinas' committal to subjectivity.

2.5 Method and Communication

In this section I will locate certain key textual inconsistencies from *Totality and Infinity* in an effort to show that the work struggles with the language it uses and ultimately fails in showing how exteriority is better than interiority⁴⁸. At first glance, *Totality and Infinity* appears to be a systematic defence of subjectivity. The table of contents lists the headings of each section and promises discussions of key themes in particular parts of the book. As one reads, however, one realizes that the book is not as systematic as it first appears. As Colin Davis points out, the book contains many interruptions:

The book is repetitive and fragmentary, constantly recapitulating past arguments or anticipating future ones. Or it may even seem circular: the discussion of desire with which the main text begins does not so much prepare the ground for what follows as make little sense without it. And, rather than a conclusion, *Totality and Infinity* ends with twelve sections grouped together as 'Conclusions', in the plural.⁴⁹

Levinas took great pains not to present the arguments of the book as a totality or unified whole. The very name of the book sheds light on both its form and its content. The book is to be understood as an infinity, as a work that cannot be understood as a whole.

⁴⁸Levinas uses the term 'better' to emphasize that ethics cannot be understood under the guise of 'truth'. Levinas thus places the good over the true.

⁴⁹Colin Davis, 55.

The text struggles with the very language it tries to abdicate. Take, for instance, the use of the term ‘experience’. Levinas claims the relation with infinity “cannot . . . be stated in terms of experience” and in the same paragraph claims “the relation with infinity accomplishes experience in the fullest sense of the word [*l’expérience par excellence*]⁵⁰.” Levinas later qualifies this use of the term ‘relation’ and claims that the ethical encounter is a ‘relation without relation’ [*rapport sans rapport*]. What is Levinas trying to accomplish in such formulations? One may take a Derridean standpoint and suggest that the terms are used under ‘erasure’, much like Heidegger crosses out his use of ‘Sein’ in his later thought. However, it is problematic where erasure would stop. How intelligible would the book be if each word were used under erasure?

Davis points out that the notion of ‘origin’ is also used in many ways that conflict and even contradict each other. This ‘origin’ refers precisely to the validity of interiority before and after it is founded by infinity. The meaning of ‘origin’ poses problems for readers who try to understand the text as a sequential narrative. Levinas is aware of the problems of presenting his philosophy as a sequential narrative when he writes: “Separation is first the fact of a being that lives somewhere, from something, that is, that enjoys . . . This egoism is indeed founded on the infinitude of the other, which can be accomplished only by being produced as the idea of Infinity in a separated being⁵¹.” In the same sentence Levinas claims that egoism is founded on the idea of Infinity *and* claims that it must be produced in a separated being – implying that the separated being must have been there *before* it became an ethical subject. The problem of which comes first, as the problem of ‘origin’, will be restated in *Otherwise than Being* as the ‘very origin of the origin’, or as an ‘immemorial past’ prior to any historical past.

⁵⁰*Totality and Infinity*, 25.

⁵¹*Totality and Infinity*, 238.

What do the textual inconsistencies concerning the use of the term ‘origin’ mean for the value of Levinas’ book? To understand the ‘book’, no doubt, is to try and contain Levinas’ thought as a totality. I suggest the book itself mimics interiority: it is an ‘opening’ which welcomes Otherness. Levinas’ ‘method’ consists of many interruptions, repetitions and surprises. It is like a roller coaster ride that at times goes around in circles. The reader, I think, is not to ‘understand’ Levinas, but is to be ethically inspired to escape the totalities that surround one’s private life. Levinas struggles to say the Good, not the truth. Is there a language of the Good that is somehow prior to the language of the truth? In the next chapter, I will present Levinas’ answer to this question by discussing his notion of the ‘Saying’ that is prior to any truth or spoken word.

The problem of the text is further made explicit when Levinas claims throughout *Totality and Infinity* that the ethical relation is essentially one of discourse. Even in *Totality and Infinity* Levinas is careful to say that ethics as discourse is not essentially a spoken discourse, but gives rise to the possibility of using words. Levinas uses the term ‘expression’ as a way of talking about language prior to the use of words⁵². Spoken language presupposes the face-to-face relationship: “Language as an exchange of ideas about the world . . . presupposes the originality of the face without which . . . it could commence.”⁵³ Now, the text obviously falls within the range of ‘language as an exchange of ideas’. Levinas depends on this very exchange just by using the text to communicate the significance of the Other. If Levinas struggles to put what precedes words into words, then he risks reducing his thought into the Same. Levinas is no stranger to this problem of using the text to describe expression and discourse. In fact, the later Levinas is fond of saying that ‘philosophy is a risk’. This phrase refers precisely to the problem of using

⁵²*Totality and Infinity*, 202.

⁵³*Totality and Infinity*, 202.

derivative terms and propositions to explain the conditions that ground those very terms and propositions. Using the language of the Same to show how the Same is made possible (by the Other) is, as Hegel would put it, like trying to learn how to swim before one jumps in the water. Levinas presupposes the Other *and* the Same prior to putting the pen to the paper.

Through the language he uses, Levinas affirms the importance of ontology because the concepts he uses reduces the Other to the Same. In the preface to the German edition, Levinas admits that *Totality and Infinity* ultimately falls back into ontology⁵⁴. In his later work, Levinas will change his vocabulary and drop terms such as ‘interiority’ and ‘egoism’ in favour of terms that are meant to escape traditional thought. His later philosophy is an attempt to state the Other without using the language of interiority. Moreover, he will no longer start with the solitude of the existent but will begin with the proximity of the self to the Other. Because the lonely subject no longer has a crucial role in his analysis, it is said that Levinas’ subject becomes ‘de-centred’. That is, the subject is no longer conceived as ‘for-itself’ but as ‘for-the-Other’.

Even in the later works we will find that interiority still has a crucial role in Levinas’ ethics. If interiority still has a crucial place in his thought, even if it is mainly through the dependence on language, then his attempt to ‘go beyond’ ontology may still be plagued with difficulties.

We remember Levinas saying in ‘On Escape’ that the possibility of escape may be chimerical, and in the work from 1961 this premonition may ring true. Its failure is foreshadowed even in the earlier works, where the analyses of the existent are always conducted from the point of view of interiority. I think Levinas has always been aware of

⁵⁴*On Thinking-of-the-Other*, 197.

the pitfalls of language. His attempts to reformulate the question of being in his early work, I contend, are carried out so that he can understand the relation to the Other without reference to the language of Heideggerian ontology. Despite his success in escaping some of Heidegger's key terms such as ekstasis, project, and Being-in-the-world, Levinas is still unable to escape the language of traditional philosophy. This language is indeed necessary to communicate the significance of the Other. However, it is a language that can only betray what it seeks to express.

2.6 Conclusion

This part of the thesis, though essentially abstract, had many aims. The first was to show how Levinas' notion of a non-ontological subject from his earlier works is still present in the work from 1961. Next, I proceeded by showing how subjectivity is not characterized primarily by the need for knowledge but by enjoyment. His notion of enjoyment presents the subject as a capsule that takes itself as a totality. Interiority is turned inside-out when the Other arrives on the scene. Yet, I went to great lengths to demonstrate that interiority, and thus the language of ontology, has a central role in Levinas' ethics that cannot be reduced or ignored. This necessity of ontology leads to textual problems when Levinas uses the language of the Same to express the Other. In his later works Levinas will adopt new terms and will rarely use terms such as 'interiority' or 'need'. The next section will establish Levinas' philosophy as ultimately failing to escape ontology and thus as an interiority that always has the Other in mind but always betrays it in words. Levinas' de-centred subject, presented in his later work, is meant to avoid the emphasis on the Same by making little mention of interiority. No longer will he begin with solitude, but immediately begins with the Other. The significance of the subject and interiority in his later work, and its relation to Levinas' conflict between method and

communication, will occupy us until the final pages of the thesis.

Chapter III

Subjectivity and the Saying: How the Said is Crucial for Levinas' Thought

3.1 Introduction

In the last chapter we learned that although Levinas' notion of subjectivity is able to escape the totalizing grips of ontology, at a more fundamental level his very method ultimately succumbs to the betrayal of expressing the Other propositional language. The work from 1974, *Otherwise than Being*, is consistent with Levinas' other works in that he is still trying to escape Being by pointing toward a more fundamental source that makes meaning and subjectivity possible. In this analysis, I will first illustrate how Levinas' task in this late work is still consistent with his earlier works and how his early reformulation of the problem of Being has evolved into a textual problem between method and communication. *Otherwise than Being* is at once a response to Derrida's claim that Levinas' language thematizes the Other and Levinas' simultaneous need to utter a cry for the Other without bringing the Other, or subjectivity even, under a totality. After I have established the transition from subjectivity to textuality, I will focus heavily on Levinas' distinction between the 'Saying' and the 'Said'. I argue that this very distinction is foreshadowed in Levinas' earliest works and is Levinas' own concession that totality plays an indispensable role in his thought. Showing how the Saying is related to ethical subjectivity, my final goal is to show how Levinas' notion of justice demands a place for the Said. I do not claim that this role of totality signals the downfall of Levinas' project. Rather, the Said is needed in order to keep in touch with the way things are in the world; the Said is needed for the possibility of justice.

3.2 Subjectivity and Totality Revisited

In the early texts, we have seen that the ‘escape’ from Being is something effected by the will of the subject. We saw this in ‘On Escape’, *Existence and Existents* and ‘Time and the Other’. By the time we reach *Totality and Infinity*, we find that the escape from Being is not an act but something that is passively experienced (if, indeed, ‘experience’ is the right word). Even the event of bathing in sensibility involves a passivity that marks an escape from Being. The face-to-face relationship, as we have also seen, is passive as a revelation. Subjectivity, as both ‘open’ and ‘closed’, takes itself as a totality, but sensibility and the relation with infinity rescues it from ontology. In *Otherwise than Being*, the passivity of subjectivity is given an even more radical interpretation, as Levinas goes one step further in trying to reformulate subjectivity as beyond ontology or, as he now puts it, as ‘beyond essence’.

Remembering Levinas’ early warning that the notion of escape may be chimerical and that the escape from Being does not involve any particular destination, we read these words at the outset of *Otherwise than Being*:

The task is to conceive of the possibility of a break out of essence. To go where? To stay on what ontological plane? But the extraction from essence contests the unconditional privilege of the question “where”; it signifies a null-site [non-lieu]. The essence claims to recover and cover over every exception – negativity, nihilation, and, already since Plato, non-Being, which “in a certain sense is.” It will then be necessary to show that the exception of the “other than being,” beyond non-being, signifies subjectivity or humanity, the *oneself* which repels the annexations by essence. The ego is an incomparable unicity; it is outside of the community of genus and form, and does not find any rest in itself either, unquiet, not coinciding with itself . . . A unity that has no site, without the ideal identity a being derives from the kerygma that identifies the innumerable aspects of its manifestation, without the identity of the ego that coincides with itself, a unicity withdrawing from essence – such is man.

We can see many consistencies here between Levinas’ early and later thought. First, we have the question of destination first posed in ‘On Escape’. In many places, Levinas is careful to call the destination a site and non-site. This is not a play on words.

Rather, he is repeating the idea that the relation with the Other has a foothold in Being (to quote *Existence and Existents*) and at the same time is beyond it. That is, he emphasizing both the unity of the Same and Other *and* their absolute separation. Levinas moves from the notion of escape to the notion of subjectivity as beyond Being. I contend that Levinas' early notion of a non-ontological subject allows Levinas to conceive of a theory of subjectivity that grants the importance of ontology while allowing for the possibility of the Other to break through its totality. We have seen that the 'open' and 'closed' doors of interiority is this very site and non-site where Same and Other have their respective places in the subject. Since the relation with infinity is prior (or better) than the relation with totality, the subject escapes all genus and form. That is, the subject cannot be conceptually defined. Subjectivity is always an open door to the Other.

We are reminded of Paul Ricoeur's criticism that Levinas' subject is not defined by its capacity for discovery; I have shown that Ricoeur misread Levinas on this point. Levinasian subjectivity is one that is in a learning-relation with the Other. The isolated solitary 'I' gains its ethical subjectivity, like a voice from Mount Sinai, from the Other who appears as a Face. The Face is not a spectacle nor is it representable. In *Otherwise than Being* and other works from that period, Levinas also wishes to present a notion of subjectivity that is not a totality. Instead of asking about the relation between existence and existents or about the relation between totality and infinity, Levinas' analyses centre around a key distinction between the 'Saying' and the 'Said'. In the next section I will discuss the Saying-Said correlation and will then show how it is related to Levinas' notion of the subject⁵⁵. Throughout, I will emphasize the need for the Said, anticipating my later discussion of the role of the Said in matters involving justice.

⁵⁵In effect, I am also arguing that there is no 'turn' in Levinas' thought.

3.3 The Saying and the Said

In the early works, we see that Levinas cannot name Being's beyond. Such naming would reduce the beyond to Being; it would be to signify the otherwise than Being as a Being. The major difficulty with *Totality and Infinity* is this precise problem of how to describe the Other without reducing it to a theme. Levinas' text, we have seen, struggles to put in words what words cannot express. In a 1967 essay, 'Violence and Metaphysics', Derrida accuses Levinas of reducing the Other to the Same, claiming Levinas uses the very 'language of light' that he renounces⁵⁶. Derrida's essay introduced Levinas to the English-speaking world and arguably presents Levinas as a shaky self-defeating thinker who uses the very tools he tries to abandon. Derrida's influence on Levinas is not a matter I will pursue here. I would like to note, nevertheless, that Derrida did play a role in the writing of *Otherwise than Being*. He played a vital part in Levinas' dissatisfaction with the written text and influenced him to focus more on the structure and adequacy of language⁵⁷.

We have seen Levinas was occupied with the problem of language even in *Totality and Infinity*. *Otherwise Than Being*, however, is from the outset a work that has a heightened concern with the language it employs and with the difficulty of trying not to reduce the unsayable to words. To express this difficulty, Levinas uses the terms 'Saying' [*le dire*] and 'Said' [*le dit*]. The 'Said' refers to words as they appear in a text or as they are spoken. The Said consists of propositions and statements that make declarations about the way things are. Traditional philosophy, Levinas claims, has always been

⁵⁶Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 118, 128.

⁵⁷For a good treatment of Derrida's criticisms of Levinas, see Peter Atterton, 'Levinas and the Language of Peace: A Response to Derrida', *Philosophy Today*, Spring 1992, 36(1): 59-70; Richard A. Cohen, *Elevations*, 305-321.

concerned with the Said, with trying to express truths about the world and the subject. The Said, then, belongs to totality. Every utterance, proposition, or statement, Levinas claims, is preceded by a more fundamental structure or situation that makes the Said possible. Levinas calls this situation the 'Saying'. The Saying is not a Said, that is, not a proposition or statement, although a Saying is always expressed in terms of the Said; it is exposure to the Other before any words are spoken; it is an expression or action, such as holding the door open for someone, saying 'After you, sir'; it is indeed expressed in the Said but it cannot be exhausted by it. We cannot even call the Saying-Said relation a 'distinction' or a 'relation' since the Saying is prior to any distinction or relation – indeed we are reminded of the non-relation between Same and Other in *Totality and Infinity*.

The Saying-Said correlation, as we have come to expect, has much in common with Levinas' earlier distinction between totality and infinity, and is actually a more extreme interpretation of that 1961 distinction. If we recall, totality is made possible by infinity, which is overflowing and inexhaustible. Both terms need each other. The Saying, likewise, cannot be absorbed in the Said, but nevertheless the Saying needs the Said in order to be communicated. Ontology cannot be reduced to ethics, although we must try to conceive of ethics as beyond ontology. Likewise, Levinas struggles to perform a 'reduction' of the Said to the Saying, in an effort to arrive at a Saying without a Said. As I will show shortly, Levinas does not try to eliminate the Said from the Saying but thinks it is necessary nevertheless to conceive of a Saying that is not tainted by any totalizing Said. Once I show that the Said is indispensable to Levinas' thought, I will then suggest that ontology itself – as the Said *par excellence* – has a crucial role in his thought that is irreducible and non-derivative.

Levinas' struggle to talk about a 'pre-original' Saying is just as difficult as trying to talk about the Other by using the language of the Same. The whole text of *Totality and*

Infinity, I suggest, is a Said that continuously un-says itself with appended prefaces and the careful attempt not to provide formal definitions of key concepts. Yet the text does make bold assertions and does present a series of propositions. In doing so, the text has fallen into a Said — this is the price that any expression of the Saying must pay:

The correlation of the saying and the said, that is, the subordination of the saying to the said, to the linguistic system and to ontology, is the price that manifestation demands. In language qua said everything is conveyed before us, be it at the price of a betrayal. Language is ancillary and thus indispensable . . . Language permits us to utter, be it by betrayal, this *outside of being*, this *ex-ception* to being, as though being's other were an event of being.⁵⁸

If the Saying is always betrayed by language qua Said, then why bother with the Said? Why cannot we just stick with the Saying? The only way to utter a cry on behalf of the Other is to use language and risk putting the Other under a totality. Levinas sees philosophy, as the discourse of the Said, as a risk because of this very threat to the Other. Philosophy, nevertheless, always tries harder to say the 'Other', although it always ends up with a totality. To amplify this risk of philosophy, Levinas distinguishes philosophy from skepticism. A skeptic, as we know, may doubt if there can be truth, and that very claim to doubt is itself a statement taken to be true. Thus, the skeptic defeats himself and philosophy gains the upper-hand. The skeptic, nevertheless, "has the gall to return"⁵⁹ as philosophy's illegitimate child, and the cycle continues. The Saying-Said correlation shares the same fate: the Saying has priority, but in being expressed it becomes a Said and a text (a truism). The Saying once again resurfaces by trying to 'un-Say' that Said, *ad infinitum*. Levinas, though, is not claiming to be a skeptic but insists that the skepticism-philosophy correlation is a never-ending cycle and is a precise expression of the movement to and fro the Saying and the Said.

⁵⁸*Otherwise than Being*, 6.

⁵⁹*Otherwise than Being*, 7.

The Saying and the Said, as skepticism and philosophy, are two terms that are inseparable. This inseparability is precisely what Levinas means by 'diachrony'. Levinas is not choosing between skepticism or philosophy, nor is he choosing between the Saying and the Said. Nor, to Derrida's satisfaction, is he choosing between 'Greek' or 'Jew'⁶⁰. Rather, his point is that *both* are valid and necessary. They must co-exist despite their differences. In the next section we will look at the Saying-Said correlation's relation to subjectivity. What role does the Saying play in ethical subjectivity? These pressing concerns will be addressed in the next section.

3.4 Ethical Subjectivity as Saying

In *Totality and Infinity* Levinas had established that the ethical relation is essentially one of discourse. Although there Levinas does not make much of the Saying-Said correlation, mentioning it only once, he struggles to show how ethical discourse is outside of all totality and is a relation with infinity. Ethical discourse is prior to any spoken word. Yet in ethical discourse, where I offer the Other my world, I must express my ideas using propositions and statements. Before any word is uttered, I have already recognized the Otherness of the Other and have already seen the Face. This ethical encounter is an event the subject experiences passively. The encounter with the Other is not something willed by the subject, but occurs as a surprise, as a shock to the totality of egoism. Of course, we keep in mind the 'revelatory' aspect of Levinas' thought.

⁶⁰One of Derrida's central criticisms is that Levinas forces us to choose between the 'Jews' (ethics) and the 'Greeks' (ontology). See the last paragraph of 'Violence and Metaphysics' (Derrida, 153). While it is true Levinas wants to show how one is 'better', the 'Greek' aspect of Levinas' thought is just as important as the 'Jewish' part. The Saying-Said correlation, I claim, expresses this very importance of totality.

Otherwise than Being and the other works from that period⁶¹ offer a more radical interpretation of the passivity of ethical subjectivity. Levinas continuously refers to a passivity that is more passive than any passivity. There is little to no emphasis on the active role of the subject. From the start, the subject is ‘hostage’ to the Other, to whom the subject’s moral acts are a paying-off of a debt that will never be fully paid. This ‘hostage’ situation of subjectivity is also what Levinas calls ‘substitution’, which refers to putting oneself in the position of the Other. The Other is no longer a teacher but is the master of justice whom I am always serving. Subjectivity is not ‘for-itself’, but is ‘for-the-Other’. The ‘I’ is no longer the centre of philosophical concern; subjectivity, as one says, is now de-centred. Or, as Levinas puts it, the subject has lost its point, is ‘dis-appointed’:

Here, on the contrary, subjectivity, the psyche, is passively structured as for the other, as the one-*for*-the-other. My basic posture is the for-the-other . . . The subject is thus he who has lost his place. Without that loss, the I [*je*] always remains a point, and a firm point. Here, the last remaining point is dis-appointed.⁶²

Ethical responsibility does not demand any compensation from the Other. For Levinas, to ask anything of the Other would be immoral. Responsibility puts one at risk and makes one vulnerable: “The “me” finds himself only in his skin, but skin is no longer protection; it is a mode of being exposed.”⁶³ This passivity is beyond any distinction between activity and passivity because such a distinction is theoretical. Ethical responsibility, as we have seen, is prior to any concepts or quest for knowledge. Using the language of passivity and activity presupposes the original encounter with the Other.

What does ethical responsibility have to do with our discussion of the Saying?

Levinas explains:

⁶¹The other work I will be using is *God, Death and Time*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000). This book consists of lectures from two courses given by Levinas in 1975-1976. The first course is on ‘Death and Time’ and the other ‘God and Onto-theo-logy’.

⁶²*God, Death and Time*, 158.

⁶³*God, Death and Time*, 159.

The Saying, prior to any language that conveys information or content, prior to language as a Said, is exposure to that obligation for which no one can replace me, and which strips the subject right down to his passivity as a hostage. In the Saying, the way in which I appear is an appearing-before or a co-appearing: I am placed in the accusative case, in the place of the one accused—I lose all place. In this sense the I [*je*] does not posit itself but is impoverished to the point of substituting himself, of suffering and expiating for another, and even for the other's wrongs to the point of expiating itself. This is in no sense an act of reflection upon oneself; it is a passivity that is not even opposed to activity, for it is beyond the passivity that would merely be the reverse of the act.⁶⁴

The Saying is an exposure to the Other, an exposure that cannot be understood conceptually, that is, in terms of a Said. The Saying is the losing of place or de-centring of subjectivity. The Saying is not of the order of language as much as it is a situation or structure that allows for language to be spoken. Any attempt to put the Saying into a Said does not only betray the Other, but it betrays the subject's duty to look out for the Other. This 'duty' does not have its source in reason or categorical imperatives, as we find in Kant. The imperative to be responsible for the Other comes not from the subject itself but from the Other. Responsibility derives from a past that can never be remembered. It is, as Levinas puts it, 'an-archival', or without beginning. The ethical structure, precisely, is as old as the human race itself.

The subject is not of the order of Being. The identity of the 'I' cannot be understood without appeal to the Other. We remember that *Totality and Infinity* uses the language of a sequential narrative. His later work abandons this temporal language and begins with the ethical responsibility of the subject. Thus it is difficult for Levinas to discuss the identity of the ego in solitude as he had done in earlier works. There is a remarkable consistency in his works, however, that extends right from 'On Escape': Levinas distinguishes between the 'I' and the 'self'. For the later Levinas, however, even the 'I' is subjected to the Other. The duality of existence presented in his earlier works

⁶⁴God, *Death and Time*, 162.

had one side that held Being as a predicate and another side that took being as a burden. This very duality is now for-the-Other: “To be me (and not I [*moi*]) is not perseverance in one’s being, but the substitution of the hostage expiating to the limit for the persecution it suffered.”⁶⁵ In substitution the ‘I’ is not a nominative but an ‘accusative’, a ‘moi’. This accusative, which he here puts in parentheses, Levinas says, is equivalent to the statement “Here I am!” [*me voici!*] which puts me in a particular position – or non-position – and gives me my uniqueness. The subject is not unique because it is different from other subjects but because it is always in a position to help the Other. I am unique because I have the ability to respond to the Other in a particular situation. This ability to respond, precisely, is responsibility.

The Saying, as a passive situation that leaves me vulnerable and in debt to the Other, is beyond ontology and all concepts and determinations. To put the Other in a Said is to betray her Otherness. Levinas prefers the term ‘sincerity’ to describe the ethical Saying. It is sincerity that prevents the Saying from being absorbed by the Said:

Sincerity annuls the absorption of the Saying in the Said wherein, beneath the cover of words, information is exchanged, wishes are uttered, and responsibility recedes. No Said equals the sincerity of the Saying; no Said is adequate to the truthfulness that is before the true; no Said is a beyond presence and representation.⁶⁶

The Said is ‘insincere’ because it tries to conceptualize the Other. All of Levinas’ works, ultimately, are insincere in this respect. Even in his later works *Otherwise than Being* and *God, Death and Time* there is a need to ‘un-Say’ the Said so that we can preserve the Saying’s sincerity. This continuous process of unsaying the Said is itself the process of philosophy. Philosophy, in Levinas’ view, is the attempt to say the Other. This is the attempt to do metaphysics. Metaphysics, the desire for Otherness, cannot avoid falling

⁶⁵*God, Death and Time*, 181.

⁶⁶*God, Death and Time*, 192.

into an ontology. That is, the history of philosophy – from Plato to Descartes, Kant, Hegel and Hegel – have all failed in preserving the otherness of the Other. Does Levinas' thought succeed in thinking the Other without reducing her to a Said? Levinas' thought is a struggle to preserve the need for ontology while showing that it is not the fundamental mode of philosophical enquiry. His thought is a quest to keep ontology down, to not let it get the upper hand, but to allow it to have some validity. Like skepticism, however, ontology always returns from the ashes.

3.5 My Fate is Important: The Need for Justice and the Rights of the Subject

So far in my thesis I have said little about justice. This silence was intentional, as I wished not to stray off into a discussion on political philosophy. The notion of justice occupied a large part of *Totality and Infinity*, where Levinas declares, 'language is justice'. For Levinas, justice is the third party. It is crucial to note that the ethical relation is never a private relation between two speakers. The subject is always in contact with more than one person. The third person is needed in order to act as a judge, and language is used as a way of placing such judgments on the actions and behaviours of particular individuals. Levinas views history as the process in which justice should improve itself, that is, a process that seeks continuously to be for-the-Other. In justice, however, matters are expressed in the Said – the accused must present his case and evidence is examined, etc. As I stated in the last section, Levinas never says that the Said is useless or simply derivative of the Saying. If he were to say such a thing about the Said, then the wheels of justice would not function properly. Indeed, without the Said, there would be no justice whatsoever. In justice, the Saying requires the signification and thematization of the Said:

The pre-original, anarchic saying is proximity, contact, duty without end, a saying still indifferent to the said and saying itself without giving the said, the-one-for-the-other, a substitution. It requires the signification of the thematizable, states the idealized said,

weighs and judges in justice. Judgments and propositions are born in justice, which is putting together, assembling, the being of entities.⁶⁷

As Colin Davis points out, a statement such as ‘This is wrong’ belongs in the Said and how one judges such a statement will determine how people will act toward each other in society. If we focus on the Saying and ignore statements like ‘Killing is right’ or ‘Killing is wrong’, we have certainly lost touch with the way things are in the world. Getting the Saying ‘right’ is not a matter of trying to figure out the Saying and *then* moving to the Said. We are continuously engaged in the Said and the Saying-Said correlation, as the correlation between what is right and what is taking place, constantly re-informs itself. Indeed, the process of justice, I believe, is the back-and-forth correlation between the Saying and the Said. History is a communication between a concern for what is right and what is actually taking place.

Levinas’ notion of justice prevents the individual from deriving moral maxims from its own capacities, such as we find in Kant. Faced with a multiplicity of ‘others’, in justice I find that I am an Other for the others. This does not mean that I can demand the others to treat me in a certain way, but it does nonetheless restore some integrity to the rights of the individual which some commentators claim is lost in Levinas’ ethics⁶⁸. We see that Levinas has found a way of protecting the ‘I’ from atrocity without reducing the subject to ontology. I think this is a profound accomplishment, as he uses the notion of the ‘third party’ as a way of restoring validity to the ‘I’, who remains ‘despicable’ but who nevertheless is still an Other with a face of its own. This idea of the face of the ‘I’ allows

⁶⁷*Otherwise than Being*, 161.

⁶⁸See, for instance, Michael Haar, ‘The Obsession of the Other: Ethics as Traumatization’, *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, vol. 23, no.6, 1997, p. 106, where Haar offers a ‘totalitarian’ view of the Other where the ‘I’ has no rights: “Without the balance of the Same, the Other could become highly dangerous, even totalitarian and dangerous”. I believe there is a balance between Same and Other in Levinas, most notably in his notion of justice. Justice protects the Other, but if I am an Other for the Other, then by implication it protects me as well.

the self to still be a Face that commands – but a face that commands without words.

Thus, the notion of the Saying works both ways, and we can understand it working with the subject without having the subject to command respect in speech. The Saying is, after all, prior to spoken words. Justice allows the subject to grant that his face is an Other for the other person and to claim, ‘*my lot is important*’:

But justice can be established only if I, always evaded from the concept of the ego, always desituated and divested of being, always in non-reciprocable relationship the other, always for an other, can become an other like the others. Is not the Infinite which enigmatically commands me, commanding and not commanding, from the other, also the turning of the I into “like the others,” for which it is important to concern oneself and take care? My lot is important. But it is still out of my responsibility that my salvation has meaning, despite the danger in which it puts this responsibility, which it may encompass and swallow up . . .⁶⁹

I cannot command reciprocal responsibility of the Other for me, but Levinas’ notion of justice allows him to escape the subjectivist and non-universalist ethics that he would otherwise be in danger of falling into. The subject, nevertheless, cannot expect fair treatment from others. The structure of Levinas’ notion of justice makes it so that the chances of the ‘I’ being treated well is just as likely as the ‘I’ treating the Other well. There is indeed a utopian aspect to Levinas’ thought, but it is not one that makes claims about the future nor one that offers a theory of history. Still, the fact that he dedicated *Otherwise than Being* to the victims of the Holocaust tells us that the book is a response to what has happened in history. The book, as is Levinas’ philosophy as a whole, is a cry that the Other never be allowed to be put to death. It is also a cry that he not be put to death. His work is a response to the Holocaust and to the demand that no other similar event take place again.

In offering a response, Levinas demands we listen. His philosophy, however, is

⁶⁹*Otherwise than Being*, 160.

not to be thought of as a form of preaching. He does not want us to listen to him, *per se*, but to the other person and to prevent another catastrophe from taking place. Although Levinas' philosophy develops from an active to a passive understanding of the escape from being, the primacy of action over speech is a constant thread in his thought. Listening to the other person is not to understand a proposition of truth, but to act on the basis of an urgency, much like the conclusion in Aristotle's practical syllogism.

Returning to the main theme of the paper, namely the correlation between the Saying and the Said, Levinas' understanding of justice is the ultimate expression of the need for the Same in his thought. Without the Said, how could one justify one's actions? Literally, one would get away with murder. The Saying is an immediate awareness of the preciousness of human life, an awareness that comes to us immediately whenever we look into the face of another person. As Levinas says, all commandments derive from the one commandment 'Thou shalt not kill'. The Said, whose authority alone cannot dictate what is right or wrong, is nonetheless necessary because we need to communicate in order to stand up for the Other. Putting ethics, as Saying, into words, into the language of ontology, is a necessary risk. It is a risk we cannot avoid, it is a betrayal we need. I turn to Chanter as a concluding source of support:

To reduce what Levinas' texts say to a content, a theme, or a thesis is to refuse to acknowledge the efficacy of the distinction between the said and the saying. Of course, as Levinas often reminds us, such a reduction is unavoidable – thematization is 'inevitable' (*OTB*, 151). Indeed, it is not merely inevitable, it is also necessary. The saying calls for the said. Responsibility requires justice. Ethics needs philosophy.⁷⁰

3.6 Conclusion

I have written a thesis on Levinas' attempt to escape totality, and perhaps even I

⁷⁰Tina Chanter, 'The Betrayal of Philosophy: Emmanuel Levinas' *Otherwise than Being (Philosophy and Social Criticism*, vol. 23, no. 6, pp. 65-79), 67.

have failed to 'acknowledge the efficacy of the distinction between the said and the saying', as Chanter has put it. Yes, my thesis, as philosophy, has been a risk. It is a risk, nonetheless, that I think is necessary for I have taken upon myself to show how totality and ontology is crucial for Levinas' project. Perhaps, in doing so, I have risked understanding Levinas' thought as a totality. How can one write about Levinas while preserving the openness to infinity that his thought seeks to preserve? Such an endeavour is perhaps impossible. Joining hands with Levinas, we shall leave the attempt to un-Say all that I have Said to the future of Western thought. This will be the attempt to leave the 'logos' of the Greek's, the attempt to formulate a Saying beyond any Said – but nonetheless while remaining sensitive to what is Said. Justice demands that we keep close to human affairs. Without this connection with the world, the Saying remains an abstract concept. That is, there is no justification nor defence and no safeguard against the occurrence of another Holocaust.

Levinas' thought, however, is not only a response to the Holocaust but also an explanation and perhaps a justification of it. Being tied to a label one cannot escape with no one to speak up and act – to free the accused by releasing him from his name – his accusation – has moral consequences that Levinas cannot accept. Levinas' philosophy expresses an urgency that derives from a particular historical event. The relevance of Levinas' thought lies in the similar situation of present-day North America and its urgency to act on the event of an unforgettable terrorist attack.

Thesis Conclusion

Emmanuel Levinas' philosophy, like the history of philosophy itself, can be viewed as a series of attempts to escape Being and totality. His early works, mostly in response to Heidegger, aim at renewing the question of Being so that the existence-existent correlation is not viewed as a totality. As I have shown, Levinas' separation between Being and world and his notion of pre-ethical subjectivity as bound to the present effect a sharp break from the ontology of Heidegger's *Being and Time*. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas goes even further in showing that interiority, which takes itself as a totality, has an 'open' door that allows for the passive encounter with the Other. Even subjectivity as enjoyment accomplishes a break from Being in that objects of enjoyment cannot be understood in terms of knowledge or totality. Nevertheless, the 'closed' doors of interiority, taking itself as a totality, remains necessary for Levinas' ethics. Showing that Levinas' language is itself the language of interiority gives the 'closedness' of interiority a crucial place in his thought. Totality, as it turns out, once again haunts the thought of Emmanuel Levinas, this time in the very language he uses to speak of the Other.

The question of the relation between interiority and exteriority reveals itself as the problem of how to 'Say' the Other without reducing the Other to a concept or name. The problem of how to express the relation between ontology and ethics, then, becomes a problem of language. Levinas' Saying-Said correlation addresses this very problem of language in an effort to show that the ethical relation cannot be put into any words. Nonetheless, spoken and written words are necessary in order to communicate the significance of the Other. The Saying and the Said rely on each other and it is not possible to have one without the other. Since the Saying is the crux of ethical responsibility and

the Said corresponds to totality in that it makes declarations about the way the world is, we are allowed to say that ontology, as totality, has a crucial place in Levinas' thought. I referred to Levinas' understanding of justice as an explicit expression of this need for totality.

Aside from learning a great deal about Levinas' philosophical enterprise, what have we learned, if anything, about Levinas' place in the history of Western thought? In Levinas' case, we have learned that it is difficult, if not impossible, to absolve oneself from the historical situation one finds oneself a part of. From his earliest works Levinas operates within a philosophical tradition that Heidegger is a part of and it is unclear whether he ever leaves that tradition. His late concern with Being and the need to signify Being's 'otherwise' and to escape what he calls 'onto-theology' speaks volumes about his ongoing concern with the philosophy of Martin Heidegger.

If we are to say that Heidegger's philosophy is an ongoing concern for Levinas and that at the same time Heidegger represents the culmination of Western thought's ongoing attempts to 'create a better Being', then Levinas by implication never achieves a true break from traditional thought. He tries to go beyond Being – to do what has never been achieved adequately in philosophy – only to fall back into an newer interpretation of the significance of totality. Granted, Levinas' thought does not explicitly seek to formulate a 'better Being', but it does have a place for totality that cannot and must not be reduced to ethics. That is to say, the propositions and statements that are involved in the process of justice cannot be reduced to some form of 'Saying' that does not say anything in particular. I have shown that such an attempt results in the impossibility of justice and the affirmation of an abstract ideal that has no foothold in the world, that is, a foothold in Being.

Levinas is both a part of the history of philosophy and is outside of it. His relation

to Descartes and the phenomenological-ontological tradition he works within put him in the same camp as both Husserl and Heidegger. He is able to escape both these thinkers, and the Greek *logos*, by absolving himself from Husserl's thematizing consciousness and Heidegger's ontology. He situates the Good over the Greek *logos*. Nevertheless, Levinas retains the term 'phenomenology' and in doing so he does not effect a complete escape from tradition, or as we have put it, a complete escape from Being. Levinas' attempt to escape from tradition has led to the return of that very tradition and an affirmation of its necessity. What would Levinas' ethics be without ontology? What would a Saying be without a Said? Ethics and the Saying need ontology and the Said as a way of measuring where we are today. Literally, Levinas' ethics must have a foothold in Being if we are to prevent another Holocaust from taking place. Without propositions and assertions on behalf of the Other, the Saying alone is not enough to preserve the life of the other person.

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