

# QUESTIONING THE SACRED: HEIDEGGER AND LEVINAS ON THE LOCUS OF DIVINITY

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For anyone sympathetic to the descriptions and diagnoses contained in those of Heidegger's writings which revolve around the issue of the sacred, the recent upsurge of awareness and concern over Heidegger's short-lived commitment to National Socialism during the 1930s must, to put it mildly, give pause for thought. Anyone who finds the religiosity, if I may use this term, of Heidegger's thought compelling cannot help but be disturbed not only by the actions of Heidegger the man in this respect but also, and perhaps more importantly, by the various critiques of Heidegger's philosophy which his political involvement has since occasioned. These give grounds to at least suspect that this religiosity is one that might be separable from a concern with human suffering and the demands of morality and justice.

Since the latter concern is also (and some will in fact want to question even this "also") essential to what is generally regarded as a properly religious sensibility, the possibility of a disjunction between Heidegger's evocation of the sacred (*das Heilige*) on the one hand, and the sense of divinity as discovered through the ethical relation on the other, requires some critical investigation. The question here is in fact not only about Heidegger, but about the possibility of such disjunction in general, and this is the truly disturbing element for anyone who feels an affinity for Heidegger's location of the sacred.

No one has drawn attention to this disjunction more powerfully and more uncompromisingly than Emmanuel Levinas. For Levinas, too, this is not merely a question about Heidegger. It is a question about what is truly sacred, about the true locus of the sacred or, as Levinas sometimes puts it, rejecting the notion of the "sacred" (*le sacré*) as a positive notion altogether, about the "holy" (*le sainteté*) as opposed to the "sacred".<sup>1</sup> Against Heidegger's

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talk of “poetic dwelling”, of the “mystery”, of the fourfold of earth and sky, mortals and divinities, all of which Levinas brands as “pagan”, Levinas’ own (quasi-) phenomenological analyses emphatically maintain that the essence of religion is found exclusively in the proto-ethical relation, the face-to-face relation between human beings. The opposition could not be any starker. While Heidegger, in “Der Feldweg”, speaks of “the wide expanse of everything that grows and abides on the pathway”, and says that “in the unspoken of its speech ... God is first God”,<sup>2</sup> Levinas remarks, “On *Feldwege* there is a tree; one encounters no men there”.<sup>3</sup>

This paper attempts to mediate between these two positions. In such a case, however, mediation does not and cannot mean simply evaluating the soundness and validity of the arguments on both sides, since the difference between the two cannot be reduced to a difference between two theses supported by inferences from a common set of evidence, or even from different sets of evidence where there is at least a consensus about what would count as evidence. In fact, even the term “position” is not wholly apt here. Rather, one is dealing in this case with descriptions and prescriptions arising from experiences so fundamentally opposed that Derrida asks if Levinas’ critique of Heidegger, with its frequent misinterpretations, does not “express an *allergy*—the word, the accusation, which Levinas plays upon so often—to the ‘climate’ of Heidegger’s philosophy”.<sup>4</sup> In this instance, mediation requires assessing factors like the sensitivity of the text to the phenomena it addresses, its inclusiveness, its points of emphasis and the appropriateness of its rhetoric, and these are all points which I will take up. Naturally, such an assessment must itself rest on an appeal to particular experiences, and cannot claim the persuasive power of universality and thus of so-called “objectivity”. I will return to this point in the course of my analysis, as one of the broader issues that arises here concerns the nature of phenomenological (understood in the broadest sense) accounts like those of Heidegger and Levinas, and of the strategies involved in evaluating them.

Because the question of the sacred, as it relates to the opposition between Heidegger and Levinas, is so closely connected with the question of ethics, the first section of this paper will examine the place and problem of ethics in Heidegger’s thought, focusing especially on Levinas’ critique of Heidegger in this respect. The second section will then move to a more precise critical analysis of the loci of divinity as presented in the writings of these two authors, with particular emphasis on the failures of Levinas, evident both in his presentation of ethics itself and in his delimitation of ethics as the only genuine place in which divinity is encountered.

### *I. Heidegger: The Charge of Unethicality*

Heidegger’s support for National Socialism and his near-silence about the Holocaust in later years is vulnerable to two somewhat different forms of

criticism. First supposing that it is possible to separate the “man” from his “philosophy”, there is the charge of unethicity directed simply at the former. This charge implies that knowledge of Heidegger’s political actions alone invalidates the content of his philosophical writings. But if it is indeed possible to distinguish the character of Heidegger the man from the character of his philosophical texts, this suggests that there could be a discontinuity between the two, and some scholars have argued that they should be judged independently of one another.<sup>5</sup>

The second and more prominent form of criticism rejects this distinction and attempts to show how Heidegger’s political involvement was the natural outcome of a certain way of thinking, a way of thinking expressed as much in his philosophical *oeuvre* as in his personal actions and his occasional political speeches and writings.<sup>6</sup> Although it can, I believe, be convincingly argued that attempts to find strong, unambiguous correlations between, say, the existential phenomenology of *Being and Time* and the ideology of German fascism are suspect, tending as they do to reconfigure retrospectively the text by selecting certain elements to the exclusion of others, any thoroughgoing distinction between Heidegger’s political involvement and his philosophy is nonetheless unsustainable, for a number of reasons. For one thing, as several scholars have pointed out, Heidegger’s philosophy itself challenges the distinction between theory and practice, between thought and existence.<sup>7</sup> It challenges the sort of philosophy which moves within these distinctions, placing itself on one side or another, and it would seem odd to defend Heidegger through recourse to distinctions which he himself rejects.

Also, however, when the question concerns *ethics*, not in the narrow sense of universal rules of conduct but in the broader and more basic sense of appropriate treatment of others (and Heidegger does have something to say about this, even if he has no “ethics” in the narrower sense), it is hard to see how the *thought* of ethics could possibly be separated from the issue of *being* ethical. How, that is, could one draw a real distinction between reflection about how to be towards others and actually being towards others in this way, such that the two could be considered independently of one another? The problem is that, on the whole, one tends to think that a reflection which says something positive about how to be,<sup>8</sup> but does not actually issue in being so has in fact said something wrong, or at least incomplete. At the very least, it has misunderstood the relation between actions and a certain type of reflection, but this is itself a fault in the reflection. Therefore, whether or not it is possible to find a positive conceptual framework common to both Heidegger’s political and philosophical works, the two cannot, I believe, be legitimately dissociated. Either there is such a common framework, in which case the philosophical works are worth questioning, or there is not, in which case they are also worth questioning, perhaps with a view to what has been left out. Thus, although the charge of being unethical directed purely at Heidegger the man would seem to disregard his philosophy, in truth the

underlying problem posed by this charge also emerges when, with an orientation towards ethics, one considers the relation between Heidegger's actions—and silence is also an action—and the nature of this thought. I will confine myself here to an examination of Heidegger's philosophical works, but with the supposition that, if there is something wrong with Heidegger, it is, in one way or another, reflected in these works.

In relation to the question of ethics, one of the most common objections to the earlier Heidegger, understood first and foremost as the author of *Being and Time*, is that he presents a form of groundless subjectivism, in which an individual, and by extension also a nation or people, is "authentic" when he, she or it resolutely decides upon a course of action in the absence of any ethical norms that would guide and limit this decision. Thus, Heidegger's early philosophy, it is charged, is a form of "decisionism".<sup>9</sup> Another, and related, objection is that, in spite of Heidegger's brief discussions of *Mitsein* and *Fürsorge* in *Being and Time*, for the most part social life belongs, in this work, to the sphere of inauthenticity. The authentic individual, by contrast, is isolated, drawn away from relations to others by anxiety and anticipatory being towards death, and thrown back upon him- or herself as a being which is, in an essential sense, alone. This, it might seem, is a philosophy that rejects the importance of concrete interpersonal relations in favour of a radically individual concern with self-realization.

On the other hand, it has also been argued that the account of decision and action in *Being and Time* is deterministic as well as voluntaristic, once the passages on Dasein's historicity in its belonging to a *Volk* are taken into account.<sup>10</sup> The apparent determinism of the later works, where man waits upon the "sendings" of being without having the power to compel those sendings and thus genuinely to alter the shape and course of an epoch, would then represent the radicalization of an ideal already present in *Being and Time*, rather than constituting a break with its supposed voluntarism and subjectivism. In addition, the later works, with their seemingly esoteric and perhaps anachronistic talk of the destiny of being, the fourfold, the turning and so forth, have also been accused of fleeing from the complex needs of actual human existence into a form of fatalistic mysticism, "a diffuse readiness to obey in relation to an auratic but indeterminate authority".<sup>11</sup> What is again left out is the question of ethics, of those freely accepted and yet obligatory relations of responsibility between human beings. In that case, Heidegger's philosophy, both early and late, would be an invitation to ethical irresponsibility.

Leaving aside for now the issue of whether Heidegger's thought goes "deeper" than ethics, there have been various attempts to defend Heidegger against these charges by locating a basic ethics within his philosophical *oeuvre*. These can be broadly grouped into what I will call the "interpersonal" defense and the "metaphysical" defense.<sup>12</sup> One representative of the former is Lawrence Vogel's *The Fragile "We": Ethical Implications of Heidegger's Being*

and Time.<sup>13</sup> In this book, Vogel argues for three possible interpretations of *Being and Time*, an “existentialist”, an “historicist” and a “cosmopolitan” one. On the “cosmopolitan” interpretation, which, however, Vogel claims, “requires a supplementation of Heidegger’s texts at odds with the author’s intention”,

authentic self-responsibility implies neither “subjectivism” nor “relativism”, for it makes possible “authentic Being-with-Others”: a posture in which one feels an obligation to respect the dignity of other persons and compassion for the suffering of others. (p. 9)

Developing this interpretation, Vogel points out how “in authentic *Mitsein* as ‘liberating solicitude’ we find the ultimate sense in which fundamental ontology is a fundamental ethics” (p. 68), although liberating solicitude must be distinguished from a concern for the other’s “welfare” (p. 78). Heidegger’s phenomenological sketches of authentic *Dasein* in *Being and Time* do not, then, depict an isolated individual acting on the arbitrariness of its own self-seeking and self-projected resolutions. Rather, what is involved here is “an attunement to the particularity of others, to other *as* truly other, stemming from an awareness of the singularity of one’s own existence” (p. 71). Unlike the “impersonal” stance which attempts to subsume both situations and persons under general categories and rules, this attunement manifests itself as “an *interpersonal* orientation motivated by one’s desire not to incorporate others into ‘the universal’ but, rather, to ‘let others be’ in their freedom for their own possibilities and to allow one’s own self-understanding to be informed by theirs” (p. 71).

Fred Dallmayr, in *The Other Heidegger*,<sup>14</sup> makes some similar points. Arguing against Habermas’ claim that Heidegger’s thought remains subject-centred and does not deal effectively with intersubjectivity, for instance, Dallmayr, like Vogel, draws attention to the primacy of *Mitsein* in *Being and Time* (pp. 60–62), and to the attitude of letting-be which is “strikingly captured in the notion of ‘anticipating-emancipatory solicitude’ (*vorspringend-befreiende Fürsorge*)” (p. 64). But sections of Dallmayr’s book, in particular Chapter 4, “Heidegger on Ethics and Justice” (pp. 106–131) also present what I am calling the “metaphysical” defense of Heidegger’s relation to ethics. Here, focusing mainly on Heidegger’s later works, especially on the commentaries on Schelling and Anaximander, Dallmayr argues that these writings subtly call for an accordance with being which is decidedly a form of justice, so that they can actually be read as an indictment of Nazism (p. 125).<sup>15</sup> For instance, in “The Anaximander Fragment”, Dallmayr argues, where “Heidegger develops the notion of *Seinsfuge* with specific reference to the issue of social (and cosmic) justice” (p. 118),

juncture and hence justice is the readiness to let others be and to attend to them with considerate care; by contrast, disjuncture or injustice involves

the insurgence of selfish conceit bent on permanently monopolizing the space of presence while shuffling others out of the way. (p. 125)

The explicit claims made by both Vogel and Dallmayr regarding the (central, not merely marginal) presence of ethics in Heidegger's thought are, I believe, fundamentally correct. Heidegger's analysis of Dasein in *Being and Time* actually requires liberating solicitude as the only appropriate and authentic response to the other, and this response is rooted in respect and concern. Moreover, as Vogel suggests, the various elements of the *Daseinsanalytik*, and precisely the ones which, on a superficial reading, appear the most "solipsistic", help to awaken awareness of the other as a concrete individual like oneself. I would in fact go further and say that the immensely rich analyses of the structure of Dasein—of worldhood, of care, of temporality—form a powerful contribution to the task of imagining the other, and in such a way as to bring home with peculiar force the inviolability of such a being and, consequently, the enormity of the violation that occurs when this being, with its in one sense utterly unique opening of the world in the web of what has touched it, is extinguished before its time. If it is at least to some extent true that evil is a failure of imagination, then it could be argued that certain elements in Heidegger's analysis have an ethical value which actually goes beyond the dry rhetoric of categorical imperatives and ends-in-themselves.<sup>16</sup>

Heidegger's later emphasis on man as a *Lichtung* of being adds a moment of transcendence, perhaps implicit all along, to this understanding of Dasein, and thus adds to the dignity and worth of this being, as Heidegger suggests in the *Letter on Humanism*.<sup>17</sup> When this is taken together with the metaphysical concern for justice, also manifest in some of the later writings, there can be little room for doubt that the general movement and tenor of Heidegger's thought is opposed to any subjective ethical relativism. Moreover, although, according to Heidegger's self-interpretation, being cannot be equated with God or with the holy, when the transcendence and special dignity of human existence rests in its relation to being, and when there is a profound ethical moment at the heart of this relation, it seems not unwarranted to claim that Heidegger's concern with justice moves in a region of thought close to the one where, in the tradition of Western philosophy and theology, the question of ethics has been posed in terms of the relation between the human and the divine. Thus, it would be simplistic to conclude that in no sense is there a connection in Heidegger's thought between ethics and the holy.

One may feel, however, that in spite of the validity of such defenses of Heidegger, there is still something awry in Heidegger's texts at those points where he touches upon the issues of justice and concern for the other. For one thing, there is the notable fact that the concrete realities of physical need, deprivation and pain, which the thought of justice usually takes as central, are not represented in the terms of Heidegger's discourse. In addition, while there is indeed, as Heidegger claims, a sense in which the notion of Dasein

as *Lichtung* elevates its status, this notion also suggests, at least on the surface, that human beings are “for” something, are means rather than ends, so that what truly counts—what has priority—is what comes to light in and through them. And this suggestion apparently demotes the status of particular human beings to a subordinate rank, thereby depriving the realities of human suffering and need of their independent ethical significance. As a response to the threat of nihilism, Heidegger’s reflections on the relation of man and being form a valuable answer to the needs of the present time, but when read with an eye to the enormous violence inflicted on individual human lives in this same time, they can appear not only as lacking, but even as ethically offensive.<sup>18</sup>

It is on precisely these points that Levinas’ critique has its edge. In turning now to an examination of this critique, I do not intend to give an exhaustive summary of it within the overall context of Levinas’ thought—a task which, in any case, I am not qualified to undertake—but only to pick out some key elements.

In an essay entitled “The Search for a Heideggerian Ethics”,<sup>19</sup> Michael Zimmerman claims that “the burden of Levinas’ critique of Heidegger” resides in noting how “Heidegger’s fascination with the Greeks led him to discount Jewish and Christian insistence on the importance of personal responsibility for the concrete other” (p. 81). Levinas’ insistence, against Heidegger and others, on the concreteness not only of daily human existence as such but of the particular individual qua individual is evident in his well-known comment in *Totality and Infinity* that “Dasein in Heidegger is never hungry”,<sup>20</sup> and in the lengthy analysis of *jouissance*, enjoyment (a relation which, Levinas claims, Heidegger does not take into consideration) in the context of which this comment occurs. It is evident also, in *Otherwise than Being*, in Levinas’ emphasis on physical need and vulnerability, on a corporeality which is necessarily and always “exposed to outrage and wounding, to sickness and ageing”,<sup>21</sup> as well as in his repeated usage, in this work, of the trope of taking the bread out of one’s own mouth to feed another as a model for the ethical relation.<sup>22</sup>

However, the heart of Levinas’ attempt to expose how not only Heidegger, but the whole of Western philosophy, has expressed and maintained a relation to the other which suppresses its reality lies in his critique of ontology as inherently totalizing and neutralizing: “Western philosophy has most often been an ontology: a reduction of the other (*l’Autre*) to the same by interposition of a middle and neutral term that ensures the comprehension of being” (Tel, p. 13/TI, p. 43). While Heidegger’s thought struggles to overcome the “totalizing” impulse which Heidegger himself sees as inherent in metaphysics, understood as the project of ordering and grasping the totality of beings within a conceptual system, for Levinas, Heidegger’s articulation of the relation between being and beings, both in *Being and Time* and in the later works, is still another instance of a comprehension within

which the individuality and genuine alterity of the other person evaporate. In *Being and Time*, according to Levinas' reading, the fact that "being is inseparable from the comprehension of being" means that "being is already an appeal to subjectivity" (TeI, p. 15/TI, p. 45), so that Heidegger's claim that beings are always understood on the basis of a prior comprehension of being means that they are not maintained in their alterity, but are reduced to being only what is visible against the horizon of the categories and projects of the constituting subject. Thus, in spite of Heidegger's attempt to break with the subject-centredness and abstractness of Husserlian phenomenology, in spite of his critique of the general tendencies within traditional ontology both to misapply categories derived from objects to human existence and to take the basic orientation from the relation of knowing, Levinas still claims that, "approached from being, from the luminous horizon where it has a silhouette, but has lost its face, the existent (*l'étant*) is the very appeal that is addressed to comprehension (*l'intelligence*)" (TeI, p. 15/TI, p. 45). In his later works, Heidegger takes what he thinks is a further step towards overcoming the increasing subject-centredness of Western thought, but Levinas sees the "turn" in Heidegger's thought as leading only to the positing of neutral, anonymous power, "a *Logos* that is the word of no one" (TeI, p. 275/TI, p. 299).

On Levinas' interpretation, then, whether Heidegger's notion of being is conceived as the general term through which entities are understood or as a faceless power ruling over their destiny, being has *priority* over beings.<sup>23</sup> Heidegger, that is, subordinates the entity to being, thereby engaging in a form of "ontological imperialism" (TeI, p. 15/TI, p. 44):

Heideggerian ontology, which subordinates the relationship with the Other to the relation with Being in general, remains under obedience to the anonymous, and leads inevitably to another power, to imperialist domination, to tyranny. (TeI, p. 17/TI, pp. 46–47)

It is impossible not to notice the non-sequitur in this sentence, and in the second section of this article, I will ask whether Levinas' often impressionistic and authoritarian method of commentary does not at times demonstrate a lack of genuine consideration of what is being said that borders on irresponsibility.<sup>24</sup> Setting this point aside for the present, however, the main thrust of his critique seems to be that the basic stance underlying Heidegger's prioritization of being is opposed to the stance in which one is open to the commanding address presented by the face of the other, where the acceptance and welcome of this address form the basis of the ethical relation, prior to any disclosure of specific qualities, prior, in fact, to anything that would generally count as "knowledge". It is in this sense that Heidegger, among others, subordinates ethics, the "calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other" (TeI, p. 13/TI,

p. 43), to ontology, to “theory as the comprehension of beings” (TeI, p. 13/TI, p. 42).

Levinas’ challenge to Heidegger’s development of the notion of *aletheia*, of truth as disclosure, makes a similar point. While Heidegger himself questions the conception of truth implicit in the standard philosophical metaphors of light and visibility stemming originally from Plato, Levinas claims that Heidegger also takes vision—and a vision which projects the horizon, the being, of entities in advance of the encounter with them—as primary (see TeI, p. 39/TI, pp. 67–68). Levinas contrasts this with “manifestation *kath auto*”, which “consists in the being telling itself to us independently of every position we would have taken in its regard, *expressing itself*” (TeI, p. 37/TI, p. 65). More fundamentally, Levinas’ objection to the subordination of ethics to ontology in Heidegger’s thought is already an objection to the relegation of the ethical moment to a moment of truth, even if the latter includes the respect that “lets be”.

R. J. S. Manning makes this point succinctly in *Interpreting Otherwise Than Heidegger*,<sup>25</sup> when he says that “because Heidegger defines respect for being as a moment within the comprehension of being, which is truth, rather than seeing respect for being as truth itself, as does Levinas, Heidegger subordinates ethics to ontology” (p. 121). Moreover, for Heidegger, Manning continues:

Any manifestation of Being, no matter what form it takes, is truth; and ethics, or what we have allowed ourselves to consider as a possible ethical dimension in Heidegger’s philosophy—respect for Being—is not truth itself, but simply amounts to the demand to let Being come to presence as truth in whatever form it may take. (p. 121)

Against this, it needs to be taken into account that “truth”, for Heidegger, is not mere factuality. The truth of being, which is truth itself, is *meaning*, and the meaning of what is, as Heidegger makes clear in *Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, is actually discovered in relation to the good that is *epekeina tes ousias*, as Plato said, beyond being as the totality of beings.<sup>26</sup> Yet the point remains that the place of *aletheia* in Heidegger’s thought, together with his notion of man as *Lichtung*, and that means as a place for the happening of truth (i.e., the site of *aletheia*), still gives the leading place of importance to disclosure, as if what really mattered were not the *desire* for the good as the desire for justice, but the *coming to light* of the justice or injustice of a situation in and through the thoughtfully receptive mediation of the “shepherd of being”.

There have, over the years, been several attempts to answer Levinas’ critique of Heidegger. Some of the major flaws in Levinas’ interpretation, for instance, are addressed by Derrida in his “Violence and Metaphysics”, which, however, is also sensitive to the perspective and force of Levinas’

own writings. One absolutely central point concerns Levinas' tendency to treat Heidegger's notion of being as if it indicated some other thing besides entities, a sort of prior existent:

There can be an order of priority only between two determined things, two existents. Being, since *it is nothing* outside the existent ... could in no way *precede* the existent, whether in time, or in dignity, etc. ... being is but the *being* of the existent, and does not exist outside it as a foreign power, or as a hostile or neutral impersonal element. (ED, p. 200/WD, p. 136)

In fact, in taking "being" as if it were something like a supreme entity, Levinas ignores what is perhaps the most fundamental element in Heidegger's thought. "There are few themes which have demanded Heidegger's insistence to this extent: being is not an excellent existent", and "in reality, there is not even a *distinction*, in the usual sense of the word, between being and the existent" (ED, p. 203/WD, p. 138).

As a second point, and an obvious one, "not only is the thought of Being not ethical violence, but it seems that no ethics—in Levinas' sense—can be opened without it", because "thought—or at least the precomprehension of Being—conditions the *recognition* of the essence of the existent", and so "conditions the *respect* for the other *as what it is* : other" (ED, p. 202/WD, p. 138). After all, what is *absolutely* foreign can in no way speak to us, can in no way address us as something to which we are related in one way or another. How could the ethical relation be possible without the prior recognition of the other *as other*, as another self—a person, as opposed to a stone—to whom I have this debt? Levinas also misunderstands Heidegger on the very issue of understanding. Heidegger's conception of disclosure is that of "letting-be", and this does not primarily mean, as Levinas seems to think, letting be as an "object of comprehension", but "concerns all possible forms of the existent" (ED, p. 202/WD, p. 138). Furthermore, what Heidegger means by being when he raises the question of being is emphatically not synonymous with a concept under which entities are to be subsumed. "Thus, the thought or pre-comprehension of Being signifies nothing less than a conceptual or totalitarian pre-comprehension" (ED, p. 206/WD, p. 140).

On the issue of Heidegger's lack of attention to the physical, C. D. Keyes makes the point that while "no one can deny Levinas the legitimacy of his analysis ... what can be challenged is the implication that Heidegger should be faulted for not having undertaken the same kind of analysis".<sup>27</sup> *Totality and Infinity* begins with biological needs, *Being and Time* with the world of pragmata; why should "the difference between the two types of analysis" not "be regarded as complementary rather than contradictory" (p. 132)?

Looking, first, at Derrida's criticism, he is surely right to say that "Being is not an excellent existent", so that Levinas' way of conceiving the priority of being, where it is understood as something impersonal apart from the entity, is wrong in the most obvious sense of the term. That is, it does not accord

with the philosophical import of Heidegger's thought on the question of being. But perhaps philosophical import is not what is truly at stake here. Consider, for example, these sentences from *Introduction to Metaphysics*:

Man is forced into such a *Da-sein*, hurled into the need (*Not*) of such being, because the overpowering as such, in order to appear in its power, *requires* a place, a scene of disclosure. The essence of being-human opens up to us only when understood through this need compelled by being itself. The *Da-sein* of historical man means: to be posited as the breach into which the preponderant power of being bursts in its appearing, in order that this breach itself should shatter against being.<sup>28</sup>

Although, in this interpretation of the Greek conception of being as *physis*, being is decidedly not another existent apart from man, not a "foreign" power that "makes" man, at least not in the ordinary sense of these terms, the rhetoric of the passage does suggest that being, as the overpowering, has a priority which one is tempted to describe in terms of first and final causes.

Of course, Heidegger would strongly object to such a metaphysical, i.e., ontotheological, description. *Physis* is neither a cause nor a ground; if anything, it is a process. Still, the precise terms and formulations that Heidegger employs here do suggest the imagination of being qua *physis*—which is certainly no one and thus, in a sense, "faceless"—as violently originating and ruling over the essence and destiny of man, and of man as for the sake of being and thus a *Mittel*, a means, existing *so that* being may have a site of disclosure within human dwelling. Although being is never, for Heidegger, some other thing besides beings, there is a form of distinction between being and beings (the ontological distinction), and the resonances of the language in which Heidegger describes this distinction and its corresponding relation have a significance that cannot be abolished by appeal to what one might call the true philosophical content, as opposed to the misleading images. These images also *speak*, and what they say indicates the nature of their source no less fundamentally than do the "cleaner" utterances, those where the language is more fully sublated into the formal clarity of philosophical discourse.

While the passage cited above forms part of a reflection on the Greek understanding of being, it also belongs to Heidegger's own thought, insofar as such reflections are meant to prepare the possibility of another beginning, a repetition, in Heidegger's sense of *Wiederholung*, of this Greek one. Although it undergoes many variations, the motif in which man is conceived as existing for the sake of the disclosure of being is constantly repeated in Heidegger's thought. In the *Letter on Humanism*, precisely where it is claimed that "the highest humanistic determinations of the essence of man" do not yet experience "the authentic dignity (*Würde*) of man", Heidegger says:

Man is rather "thrown" from being itself into the truth of being, *so that* (*daß*), ek-sisting in this way, he might safeguard the truth of being, *in*

*order that (damit) beings might appear in the light of being as the beings that they are.* (my italics) (Hb, p. 75/BW, pp. 233–234)

The point remains that sayings like these demonstrate a source that is more deeply touched by the process of coming to light, by “truth”, than by the everyday realities of suffering and injustice. Surely, as John Caputo suggests in “Heidegger’s Scandal”,<sup>29</sup> only from such a source could the thought arise that mass agriculture and “the manufacturing of corpses in gas chambers” are “in essence the same”, or that the explosion of the atom bomb “is only the grossest of all gross confirmations of the long since accomplished annihilation of the thing”.<sup>30</sup>

It is true that Levinas underestimates the qualitative indeterminacy and the quantitative force of the *lassen* in *Seinlassen*, and that the thought of being is not a comprehension. But, for all that, is Levinas not right to claim that Heidegger’s thought still exhibits an orientation that privileges the relation of knowing over the desire for justice? It is also true that the notion of an ethical relation preceding any and all disclosure is absurd. But if one accepts Levinas’ claim that, in Derrida’s words, “the neutral thought of Being neutralizes the Other as a being” (ED, p. 144/WD, p. 97), and if one also accepts that such observations can claim the status of valid objections, then one is implicitly asking that the work of reflection be guided, beforehand, by the ethical relation—and, what is more significant, one is asking this from a position which is itself prior to reflection, and certainly prior to any theorizing or theoretical justification. In that case, there is something appropriate in Levinas’ assertion of the ethical relation as preceding at least *theoretical* disclosure.

This point is relevant to a consideration of the difference between Heidegger and Levinas with respect to where their analyses “begin”. Keyes asks why Heidegger should be criticized for beginning elsewhere than Levinas, and why the two analyses cannot be considered “complementary rather than contradictory”. But insofar as Levinas is concerned with the nature of the relation to others that both precedes and determines reflection, it is understandable that he criticizes, first and foremost, Heidegger’s choice of “beginning”, for this choice expresses a prior comportment—an *existentiel* comportment, one might say—in which a decision is implicitly made about which phenomena are to have the highest rank in a consideration of human existence.

To be sure, the later passages on *Mitsein* and *Fürsorge* ensure that sociality and the concern for others are represented in *Being and Time*. Moreover, against charges of relativism, one can point out that the fundamental structure of *Dasein* and world outlined in this work actually excludes the possibility that any choice of action which treats entities having the nature of *Dasein* as means rather than ends could be justified within the total framework of its terms of analysis. Thus, Vogel is right that there is a “cosmopolitan” dimension to *Being and Time*. But perhaps, where the question is that of ethics,

not as a branch of philosophy but as a relation prior to philosophy, the formal rightness of the thought is not enough. What is demanded in this case is a sensitivity, a vulnerability or exposure, to the need of the other which is registered in the *manner* of saying what is said. In that case, although Levinas speaks against rhetoric, understood as the art of persuasion,<sup>31</sup> in another sense this is very much a question of rhetoric, for the presence or absence of such sensitivity can only be measured by the way the phenomena (for lack of a better term) are addressed.<sup>32</sup> That is, the way the phenomena are addressed in the precise contours of the language expresses the way they have been addressed beforehand, and it is precisely this “beforehand” that is at issue here. Sadly, what Levinas points out, not only against Heidegger but against the whole of Western philosophy’s self-conception, is that thought always comes too late to ensure the rightness of this “beforehand”.<sup>33</sup>

## II. Levinas: A More Subtle Form of Violence?

Levinas’ critique of Heidegger’s relation to ethics is at the same time a critique of his relation to the divine. For Levinas, “the dimension of the divine opens forth from the human face” (TeI, p. 50/TI, p. 78), and only from there, so that “there can be no ‘knowledge’ of God separated from the relationship with men” (TeI, p. 51/TI, p. 78). The aspects of human existence with which Heidegger’s sense of the divine appears to be associated, on the other hand, are all, in Levinas’ view, irreducibly “pagan”, a term that Levinas identifies with the attachment to place captured in the term “rootedness” (*enracinement*),<sup>34</sup> with *le sacré filtrant à travers le monde*,<sup>35</sup> and with “natural” existence, or the idolization of natural existence.<sup>36</sup> The “pagan” elements in Heidegger’s thought include his emphasis on human destiny as intertwined with place and landscape, his privileging of the revelatory power of art and poetry, and his elevation of non-human things. Also suspect, for Levinas, is the appropriation of Judaeo-Christian motifs of eschatology and grace in Heidegger’s later writings. Filtered through a dialogue with early Greek thought, with Neoplatonism and with German Idealism, this appropriation seems to yield the idea of an impersonal and ethically neutral power playing the role of God. To Levinas, such elements suggest that Heidegger’s conception of the sacred is, frankly, backward, since “everything that cannot be reduced to an inter-human relation represents not the superior form but the forever primitive form of religion” (TeI, p. 52/TI, p. 79).

But here, the question naturally arises as to what authorizes such a judgement. And this question is given special urgency by the somewhat alarming tone of statements like this one, the *height* from which they are spoken, as well as by their sweep, by the fact that they exclude, with one stroke, the claim to validity of vast regions within the landscape of human religious experience. Moreover, a fair treatment of this subject requires that one resist the coercive force of a certain violent gesture in Levinas’ own rhetoric, which

tacitly asserts that his mapping of ethical experience is the only possible one, the only truly ethical one, so that any domain of religious thought or sensibility not contained in this map must on that account be unethical, or at least non-ethical and thus indifferent to the Other and to justice. If left unresisted, this gesture makes it impossible to give a just hearing to those voices, for instance, that speak from a spirituality in which the sacredness of “things”, whether natural or man-made, and the sacramentality of so-called natural human activities, of the specifically human relation to food, sleep, work, sex, are intimately connected with respect for others and, indeed, with the holiness of the other. A way of thinking and speaking that implicitly dismisses all of these voices—be they Greek or Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist or Native American—with the abusive and highly suspect term “primitive” is certainly worth questioning.

There is an interesting moment in *Violence and Metaphysics* where Derrida, juxtaposing Levinas with Kierkegaard, begins one sentence with the words, “Let us add, in order to do him [Kierkegaard] *justice*” (Derrida’s emphasis), and interrupts another with the interjection, “—for we must let the other speak” (ED, pp. 163–164/WD, p. 111). Does this interjection not suggest that there is something in the manner of Derrida’s projected partner in dialogue at this moment (namely, Levinas) which in fact *resists* letting the other speak? One wonders whether, behind Levinas’ affirmation that the proto-ethical relation, *as he presents it*, is universal and prior to all reflection, behind the claim that “the ethical moment is not founded on any preliminary structure of theoretical thought, on language or on any specific language”,<sup>37</sup> there does not lurk a very old philosophical (but not only philosophical) move—the assertion of a particular perspective, in this case a perspective decidedly belonging to Judaic theology, as absolute.

It sometimes seems as if Levinas’ desire to redress the lack of attention to physical need, compulsion and violation in the thought of Heidegger and others—a just desire, as argued in the last section of this article—blinds him to a more subtle, but also dangerous, form of violence. This violence, this irresponsibility, is evident in his lack of genuine consideration for texts and experiences that are truly “other” to him. Although it must be admitted that Heidegger, too, is given to making proclamations from a questionably majestic height, one should also note, in all fairness, that this more subtle form of violence is one to which he is often deeply sensitive.<sup>38</sup>

Levinas himself, while certainly not denying the rootedness of his thought in Judaic theology, nonetheless claims to be doing phenomenology rather than theology, although he does not follow most of the procedures that were basic to Husserl’s conception of phenomenology.<sup>39</sup> Certainly, the legitimate appropriation of the term phenomenology no longer requires that one follow the particular elements of Husserlian methodology, e.g., the *epoche* and eidetic reduction, nor that one accept the premises underlying the employment of these elements. In the meantime, phenomenology has come to have

a broader and less rigid meaning, in which these elements are not necessarily preserved. What is always preserved, however, insofar as something is still phenomenology and not, say, empirical description, literature, or theology, is close attention to phenomena as they appear (which can also include noting what does not, or cannot, appear) together with an attempt to suspend, to the extent that this is possible, the intrusion of definite, inherited prejudgements and theories upon the interpretation of what is being addressed so as to achieve at least a certain degree of general validity. For the most part, it is now generally accepted that this is a limited enterprise, and that asking a phenomenology to locate strictly universal essences, understood as the already-and-always-present structures of human experience as a whole, is asking too much, since no such essences exist.

But insofar as the term phenomenology still has any meaning which would distinguish it from neighbouring forms of enquiry and writing, one still expects that an enterprise bearing this name fulfill the demands mentioned above. What I am questioning here in noting the extent to which Levinas' perspective is determined by theology is whether his writings fulfill these demands. Important facets of his presentation of the proto-ethical relation make one suspect that they do not. For instance, there is Levinas' insistence, fundamental to his thought, of the obligation, and therefore guilt, that precedes all freedom. "Does not freedom appear to itself as a shame for itself?" he asks in *Totality and Infinity* (TeI, p. 280/TI, p. 303), and in *Otherwise than Being* he quotes from *The Brothers Karamazov*, "Each of us is guilty before everyone for everyone, and I more than the others" (AE, p. 186/OB, p. 146). This notion of prior obligation is accompanied by a call to infinite responsibility, to a selflessness exceeding the requirements of equality and proportionality and of any justice based on these: "as responsible, I am never finished with emptying myself of myself" (DP, p. 122/GP, p. 182). Linked to this sense of prior guilt and infinite responsibility is Levinas' understanding of the relation between I and other as containing "a metaphysical asymmetry" (TeI, p. 24/TI, p. 53). Justice does not consist in treating the other as an equal, but "in recognizing in the Other my master" (TeI, p. 44/TI, p. 72) who approaches "in a dimension of height" (TeI, p. 48/TI, p. 75). Thus, "Goodness consists in taking up a position in being such that the Other counts more than myself" (TeI, p. 225/TI, p. 247). And this height of the other, as face, "is the manifestation of the height in which God is revealed" (TeI, p. 51/TI, p. 79).

In what manner are these claims asserted? If they are phenomenological claims, do they mean to locate structures of experience which everyone, upon reflection, could recognize as their own? But this is simply not so. By no means is everyone likely to recognize an original guilt and absolute responsibility, or a demand that I treat the other as counting for more than myself, or the ideal, achievable or not, of self-abnegation. Many are likely to respond that these are religious relics, that there is no guilt prior to the

conception of freedom, that the ethical relation is a symmetrical one in which I may demand as well as give, and in which indignation at acts of injustice committed against myself is ethically justified.<sup>40</sup> Many will also claim that the “height of God” is not revealed to them only in the human face, or that it is not revealed to them anywhere at all.

If, on the other hand, the manner of Levinas’ assertion is not descriptive but prescriptive, then one has the right to ask for justification, and it will not do—indeed, it is not just—to meet this demand with a rhetoric which implies that the demand itself is already unethical, as if failing to accord with Levinas were inherently and inevitably unjust. Thus, I would pose Derrida’s question, and perhaps more urgently than he himself does: “Independent of its ‘theological context’ (an expression that Levinas would most likely reject) does not this entire discourse collapse?” (ED, p. 152/WD, p. 103). I believe that the answer to this is yes, but it does not follow that the discourse does in fact collapse. As a phenomenology of Judaism, it retains its validity and authority. This does not mean that Levinas’ discourse can be relegated to the scrap-heap of outdated religious usages, or that it can be conveniently disposed of by setting it within its context. As a phenomenology of Judaism, it is a powerful voice to contend with. I only wanted to clarify the nature of this voice, against its own pretensions, before turning to a closer consideration of the voices that might be raised against its confinement of divinity.

The most obvious place to begin this consideration is with the very different relation that Levinas and Heidegger have towards *things*. Against Heidegger’s sense of the graciousness of *Es gibt Sein*, which evokes awe and wonder before what-is as a whole (*das Seiende im Ganzen*),<sup>41</sup> Levinas asserts “the mute and anonymous rustling of the *il y a*” (AE, p. 3/OB, p. 3), in a mood reminiscent of Roquentin’s experience of the tree root in Sartre’s *La Nausée*. Against Heidegger’s obvious respect for the things in the world encountered by human beings,<sup>42</sup> Levinas asserts that “things have no face; convertible, ‘realizable’, they have a price” (TeI, pp. 113–114/TI, p. 140). While Heidegger’s descriptions of being touched by natural phenomena are almost always imbued with a quality of transcendence,<sup>43</sup> Levinas, although he values “sensible qualities ... the green of these leaves, the red of this sunset” (TeI, p. 108/TI, p. 135), nonetheless views them purely in terms of sensuous enjoyment. While Heidegger says that “beauty is one way in which truth occurs as unconcealedness”,<sup>44</sup> Levinas speaks of “the beautiful, whose essence is indifference, cold splendour and silence” (TeI, p. 167/TI, p. 193). And whereas Heidegger finds an aspect of the holy in the bond between a people and the landscape in which its destiny takes shape,<sup>45</sup> Levinas sees, in the relation to being which underlies this experience of the sacred, the origin of tyranny. Even if his association of Heidegger with the further description of this origin as lying “back in the pagan ‘moods’ (*états d’âme*), in the enrootedness in the earth, in the adoration that enslaved men can devote to their masters” (TeI, p. 17/TI, p. 47) is another example of irresponsible commentary,

his basic questioning of the sacredness of place, and thus of the things that belong to a place, cannot be so simply dismissed.

One should not, moreover, be misled into thinking that Levinas' emphasis on need and enjoyment ultimately gives more value to "sensuous" human activities and the things bound up with them than does Heidegger's description of *Zeughaftigkeit* in *Being and Time*, or of "poetic dwelling" in later works. On the contrary, the involvement of things in the projects of a being that is constantly illuminated by the understanding (*not* theoretical comprehension) of being, such that this understanding, this disclosure, determines all of its activities to the extent that they are *human* activities, gives both these things and those activities a status above the sensuous, as this word is generally interpreted. Levinas' claim that "the world as a set of implements forming a system and suspended on the care of an existence anxious for its being ... bears witness to a particular organization of labour in which 'foods' take on the signification of fuel in the economic machinery" and that "food can be interpreted as an implement (*utensile*) only in a world of exploitation" (TeI, p. 108/TI, p. 134) is, not to mince words, ludicrous. *Zeug* does not exclusively mean "implement"; it only means "stuff", not, however, *Stoff* as the indifferent matter posited by physics and by philosophies led by physics, but the everyday stuff that human beings encounter, the stuff of the world.

Levinas' misconstrual of this point rests in part on his equation of Heidegger's concept of *Sorge* with "the naked will to be" (TeI, p. 84/TI, p. 112), whereas *Sorge* is actually meant to name the structural unity of *Dasein* as a concernfully reflexive and self-projecting entity. Still, it is not insignificant that Heidegger here chooses a term whose everyday meaning is "worry" (Fr. *souci*), and therefore Levinas does not wholly miss the mark when he maintains, against Heidegger, that "to enjoy without utility, in pure loss, gratuitously, without referring to anything else, in pure expenditure—this is the human" (TeI, p. 107/TI, p. 133). The problem is that it is hard to see how this is a description of the human, as opposed to the animal. When Levinas says that "at the origin, there is a being gratified, a citizen of paradise" (TeI, p. 118/TI, p. 144), he does not address the fact that this "origin" is always already past, and that this is why Heidegger's analysis of how *Dasein* is *zunächst* and *zumeist* begins with thrownness and falling, and develops in a way that is itself indebted to the Judaeo-Christian myth of the Fall. There is no actually present "primordial positivity of enjoyment"; "the gap between the animal and the human" does not lie in the fact that disquietude *can* trouble it (TeI, p. 119/TI, p. 145), but that it does so, from the beginning and always.

For Heidegger, it lies in the intrinsic connection between this disquietude and the special way in which human existence grasps itself, where the latter makes the former possible. Moreover, being cannot be equated with drive, and *Dasein* is not will to power with intelligence, not "natural" existence, as Levinas conceives of it.<sup>46</sup> Rather, its essential reference to being is what gives

human existence the possibility of transcending the “natural”, as the sphere of self-seeking utilization, of being established outside the realm of will,<sup>47</sup> in accord with a power which Heidegger, at one point, associates with love (Hb, p. 57/BW, p. 220). When, as in the later works, this reference is clearly and unambiguously conceived in terms of man as *Lichtung*, the space is cleared for the dimension of the sacred *within* the world, within life. Levinas, however, equates this “within” with “natural” existence, and can therefore view its sacralization only as a species of pagan idolatry. For him, by contrast, the holy resides only in that which, on his analysis, interrupts such existence: the face of the other, demanding justice.

It is on this point that mediation between Levinas and Heidegger is most difficult. Rather than asking directly how one might reach a decision between these two locations of divinity—a question which, I suspect, would quickly lead into a blind alley—perhaps it would be more fruitful to take an indirect route and ask what might prompt Levinas to set his face deliberately against the sacred as Heidegger articulates it. The answer is not hard to find. It lies in the disjunction between *le sacré* and *la sainteté*, between the sacred discovered in the sorts of phenomena that Heidegger speaks of, and the holy as linked to ethics. One has only to think of the 1945 film made by the Allies upon entering the death camps, in which at points the quiet, rustic beauty of certain villages is deliberately juxtaposed with the unspeakable horror of what lay on their doorsteps, a horror registered nowhere in the flowering hills, the still lakes and mountains, the charming facades of the houses.<sup>48</sup> Surely, this juxtaposition speaks as eloquently as the creatures on Heidegger’s field-path?

However, one may still ask whether what it says necessarily contradicts the voices referred to earlier, which testify to a conception of the sacred in which there is a deep spiritual continuity between the elevating power of beauty, the respect for nature and for things, and sensitivity to human suffering. The existence of people who can feed their hearts on the beauty of natural things while closing them to the needs of others does not demonstrate that any religiosity maintaining a connection between these forms of sensitivity is mistaken—no more than the existence of people who can combine tenderness towards their kin with cruelty towards strangers demonstrates an error in those others for whom love of the ones who are closest is experienced as preparation for the love that extends further. Rather, in both cases, from the perspective of those who apprehend such continuities, it is the ones who do not that are mistaken, that have failed to understand something.

Moreover, if the relation to divinity is excluded from every point of human existence except that at which it suffers—and justice becomes a question only where life suffers—then does this not make nonsense, and a monstrous nonsense at that, of the relation between existence and the divine? It does not merely create a problem for theoretical reflection on this issue, i.e., for theodicy, but violates an expectation of how God must be, a religious expectation prior to theology. Levinas frequently refers to Plato’s *epekeina tes*

*ousias*, but while Plato's idea of the good was that of a desire echoed in the world of becoming, a light that organizes and gives life to the things that are and in relation to which the imperfection of the world—its transience, its suffering, its injustice—are to be measured, in Levinas' version there is nothing good but the ethical relation itself, the obligation to answer the need of the other. The need of the other, however, consists in his deprivation of goods belonging to a life which in itself, on Levinas' analysis, contains no dimension of the holy. Where the only locus of divinity is found in the desire for justice, and where the desire for justice revolves around the interruption of life by need, is there any room for the idea of a kingdom of heaven (always distant, to be sure) where, within justice, life itself could be holy? For all his failings, Heidegger does help point to a *life*, a way of being in which the traces of divinity can be found not only in the negations of being, in distress, abandonment and sacrifice, but also in its affirmations, in wonder, in releasement, in celebration.

Similar points could be made about Levinas' depreciating analysis of art, as it relates to the role of art in Heidegger's sense of the sacred. Levinas' general distrust of the image, his assessment of it as a shadow of reality and his consequent rejection of its capacity to express or reveal,<sup>49</sup> is not my theme here. For these features of Levinas' analysis of art can be challenged *without* challenging the elements in his account that cast the most suspicion on the way Heidegger speaks of art in the passages where the question seems to impinge on the question of the sacred. The objection, for instance, that art can actually express the face-to-face relation more tellingly than plain speech, a point that Levinas himself eventually admits, at least with respect to poetry,<sup>50</sup> leaves intact much of his critique of art as linked to things and to enjoyment, as lacking seriousness and as constituting a flight from reality. This is simply because the *sorts* of art works Levinas seems to have in mind here are not the sort that express realities relevant to the ethical, as he conceives it. They do not include, for instance and to use an extreme example, the images produced by the victims of concentration camps—images of fragility and pain, of bodies and spirits shattered by violence and inhumanity.<sup>51</sup> And these are also not the sorts of works that Heidegger has in mind in his best-known writings on the subject—for instance, in "The Origin of the Work of Art".

Rather, Heidegger's analysis, in this essay, of the "essence" of art as manifest in the Greek temple and in Van Gogh's painting is oriented towards the same sorts of works that Levinas takes as his point of departure when he says, "The world of things calls for art, in which intellectual accession to being moves into enjoyment, in which the Infinity of the idea is idolized in the finite, but sufficient, image" (TeI, p. 114/TI, p. 140). For the most part, Levinas' analysis treats art as the object of aesthetic enjoyment, and as belonging to a form of life much like the "aesthetic stage" described by Kierkegaard in *Either/Or*. Again, this is a description which rejects any sense

of the sacred as experienced in and through the way human existence is touched by things, in the sublimity or gentleness of nature, for instance, or the significance of artifacts. Thus, the difference between Levinas and Heidegger on this point is ultimately rooted in their very different relations to both non-human entities and to human existence itself.

I have already stated what I find questionable in Levinas' stance here, and will not labour the point. Instead, I would like, finally, to make some brief comments on a theme in Levinas' writings which is in fact not represented at all in Heidegger's thought: his analysis of the feminine and of the erotic. As is well known, *Totality and Infinity* identifies the "feminine face" (TeI, p. 124/TI, p. 150)—perceived as "the Other", naturally—with "the interiority of the Home" (TeI, p. 128/TI, p. 155). And this identification once more raises the suspicion that, in spite of his definition of "the face" as "the way in which the other presents himself, exceeding *the idea of the other in me*" (TeI, p. 21/TI, p. 50), Levinas is actually all too prone to making assertions which, in the blindness of their partiality, demonstrate an insensitivity to that more subtle form of violence which does not employ physical power but which nonetheless robs the other of his or her true identity. By "true" identity, I mean here someone's identity as a *self*, rather than as an appearance anticipated by someone else so as to be encountered purely within the horizon of that person's concerns. This impression is reinforced by the simple offensiveness of some of Levinas' descriptions of the feminine, for instance as "a delightful lapse in being (*une défaillance délicate dans l'être*)" (TeI, p. 129/TI, p. 155).

These concerns cannot be dissolved by appealing to a difference between "the feminine"—"the Woman", as Levinas also says (TeI, p. 128/TI, p. 155)—and "women", as if concepts that are supposed to articulate the essence of something could be wholly absolved from the specific context and manner in which that something has been grasped. If they could, then one would have the right to refuse any interpretation which attempted to trace what is meant by such concepts back to a particular orientation towards particular beings. But this is a right which Levinas does not grant to Heidegger, and there is no reason why it should be granted to Levinas himself.

Against Levinas' conception for the feminine as the Other, Simone de Beauvoir wrote, in *The Second Sex*:

it is striking that [Levinas] deliberately takes a man's point of view, disregarding the reciprocity of subject and object. When he writes that woman is mystery, he implies that she is mystery for man. Thus, his description, which is intended to be objective, is in fact an assertion of masculine privilege.<sup>52</sup>

In response to this objection, Robert Bernasconi remarks that:

it would be possible to argue that by writing of the Other of man as a woman, without exploring what it might mean for the Other of a

woman to be a man, Levinas was simply preserving the asymmetry of a relation that necessarily excludes reciprocity. In other words, it could be argued that in terms of the social or face to face relation, it would have been more objectionable for Levinas to attempt to write from the perspective of a woman.<sup>53</sup>

The problem, though, is that, in *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas shows no consciousness of writing *as a man*, and thus of “writing of the Other of man as a woman”. It seems, rather, that he is writing as *man*, in precisely the sense of this term that de Beauvoir criticized in *The Second Sex*.

In any case, what is disturbing in his account is not simply the fact that he writes from the perspective of a man. He can hardly do otherwise. What strikes some readers—including this one—as offensive is rather the details of his characterization, which, *when asserted in a certain manner*, tend to de-face, demean and confine this other, where such a tendency is not (I hope) essential to writing from the perspective of a man. The qualification emphasized in this last sentence is important. There may be nothing offensive about a man describing his wife as a gentle being who greets him in the welcome of his home. But Levinas’ account is supposed to be phenomenology, not biography. These are not descriptions of a woman; they are assertions about “the Woman”, and it is as such that they are offensive.

The above-quoted remark by Bernasconi, however, is only a rather tentative aside in an article whose main purpose is actually to question the assumptions in the cultural partiality of Levinas’ thought. It is in much the same spirit that Luce Irigaray, in “Questions to Emmanuel Levinas: On the Divinity of Love”,<sup>54</sup> challenges Levinas’ description of the erotic relation, which is of course bound up with his notion of the feminine. Irigaray notes that in the pleasure (*volupté*) of which Levinas speaks, the feminine other is not a subject, but “merely represents that which sustains desire” (p. 110). Far from recognizing, in the act of physical love, the face of the beloved who also loves, Levinas “abandons the feminine other, leaves her to sink, in particular into the darkness of a pseudoanimality, in order to return to his responsibilities in the world of men-amongst-themselves”, and “on this point, his philosophy falls radically short of ethics” (p. 113). Levinas also “knows nothing of communion in pleasure” (p. 110). Without recognition or communion, there is naturally no possibility that the relation between lovers could be divinized. But “if these gestures of ultimate relations between living humans are not a privileged approach to God, who is he?” Irigaray asks. And what, in this approach to divinity which shuns all mysticism, is the point of flesh, except to commit sacrileges (p. 116)?

Similar concerns underlay my suggestion that Levinas leaves no room for the holiness of existence, and that this poses a problem for the relation between existence and divinity. With respect to the erotic, all I wish to add to Irigaray’s critique is some further emphasis on a point that is implicitly

recognized in her objections: that Levinas' description of the erotic relation takes no account of the version of this relation in which one person relates to another as to an *individual* and in the most concrete possible way. In these versions, what is wanted and touched is not "merely" flesh, and not femininity or masculinity as such. It is, rather, *this* person, in the utter uniqueness of his flesh, which can in no way be separated from the uniqueness of who he is as a subject. It is also to this incarnate subject that one relates in the desire to give pleasure, a desire of which there is no trace in Levinas' description. What hallows this relation is the impossibility of substitution, the fact that what I want is *him*, and no one else, and that what he wants is *me*. It is this that "spiritualizes" the intense physicality of the relation, lifting it beyond all vulgarity and beyond any need for modesty.

It is obvious that the tension between virginity and voluptuosity (TeI, p. 236/TI, p. 258), immodesty and exhibition (TeI, p. 240/TI, p. 262) in Levinas' description of sexual encounter reproduces some of the saddest and most common gestures in the history of male representation of the feminine. What is perhaps less obvious, but no less important, is that, when this description is related to the experience in which two individual subjects desire one another and recognize themselves in the desire of the other, it also appears as a profanation, and even as, I would venture to say, indecent.

I have suggested, in this article, that the exclusions characterizing Levinas' conception of divinity point to a manner of thought and assertion which, contrary to his own idea of justice, is not open to the saying of the genuinely other. Levinas' banishment of the divine from all relations except the ethical one, where ethics is understood as discontinuous with the rest of existence, includes a delegitimation of any form of religiosity which would claim to relate to the divine through a relation to, for instance, beauty, whether in nature or in art, or to non-human things, or to place, or to other subjects in relations like that of desire. But the legitimacy of this delegitimation is itself questionable. Its claim to being phenomenology is not justified, since it does not grant proper attention to the *different* appearances of that to which it addresses itself. Nor, in that case, is its claim to justice justified, since it does not allow itself to be addressed by these differences, as openness to the saying of the other would demand. Levinas' conception of the feminine is symptomatic of this lack of openness. It indicates a thought which remains within the circle of its own anticipations, while maintaining, implicitly, that that circle is all-encompassing, and that its vantage-point provides all that is needed to comprehend and judge what is not like itself. The subtle form of violence to which the title of this section alludes consists primarily in this gesture, with its failure to pay heed to the other, and therefore to the other's relation to the wholly Other.

## NOTES

- 1 See "Désacralisation et désensorcellement", in *Du sacré au saint: cinq nouvelles lectures talmudiques* (Paris: Les éditions de minuit, 1977), pp. 82–121.
- 2 *Der Feldweg* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1986), p. 4. "The Pathway", trans. Thomas O'Meara, in *Heidegger: The Man and the Thinker* (Chicago: Precedent Publishing, 1981), p. 70.
- 3 "Philosophie, justice et amour", in *Entre nous: Essais sur le penser-à-l'autre* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1991), p. 135.
- 4 "Violence et métaphysique: Essai sur la pensée d'Emmanuel Lévinas", in *L'écriture et la différence* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1967), p. 214; henceforth ED. "Violence and Metaphysics", in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 145; henceforth VM.
- 5 Alphonse de Waelhens, for example, argued for such contingency in "La philosophie de Heidegger et le nazisme", *Les Temps Modernes*, 2 (1947), pp. 115–127. More recently, Richard Rorty has advocated maintaining a distinction between the man and the philosophy. See "Taking Philosophy Seriously", *New Republic*, (April 11, 1988), pp. 31–34; and "Another Possible World", in *Martin Heidegger: Politics, Art and Technology*, eds. Karsten Harries and Christoph Jamme (New York, NY: Holmes & Meier, 1994), pp. 34–40.
- 6 See, for example, Pierre Bourdieu, *L'ontologie politique de Martin Heidegger* (Paris: Minuit, 1988); Victor Farias, *Heidegger und der Nationalsozialismus*, trans. Klaus Laermann (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1989), and the preface to this edition by Jürgen Habermas, "Heidegger—Werk und Weltanschauung"; Richard Wolin, *The Politics of Being* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1990)—to name only a few.
- 7 See, for example, Wolin's *The Politics of Being*, pp. 8–11.
- 8 Which, I believe, Heidegger's reflections do, in spite of his occasional objections to the contrary in *Being and Time* (trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962]; see e.g., pp. 68, 210–211). I agree with Robert Bernasconi's suggestion, in "The Double Concept of Philosophy and the Place of Ethics in *Being and Time*", that languages are already shaped by ethical meanings, which cannot be eradicated by simple edict. *Research in Phenomenology*, 18 (1988), p. 49.
- 9 E.g., Karl Löwith, "On Martin Heidegger's Political Decisionism and Friedrich Gogarten's Theological Decisionism", in *Martin Heidegger and European Nihilism*, ed. Richard Wolin, trans. Gary Steiner (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1995), pp. 159–169.
- 10 Wolin, *The Politics of Being*, pp. 53–63.
- 11 Jürgen Habermas, "The Undermining of Western Rationalism through the Critique of Metaphysics: Martin Heidegger", in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), p. 140.
- 12 I use this latter term deliberately, with full awareness of Heidegger's critique of metaphysics and his attempt to "overcome" it. I do not accept, however, that Heidegger's thought represents an overcoming of every form of metaphysics. On this point, see my "The Philosophical Bases of Heidegger's Politics", *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, 25 (1994), pp. 258–259.
- 13 Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1994.
- 14 Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993.
- 15 I have also argued for such a reading of these texts in "Heidegger's Appropriation of Schelling", *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 32 (1994), pp. 421–448.
- 16 Werner Marx, in fact, employs one of these elements, "being towards death", in precisely this way, in *Towards a Phenomenological Ethics*, trans. Ashraf Noor (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992).
- 17 *Ein Brief über den "Humanismus"*, in *Platons Lehre von der Wahrheit* (Bern: A. Francke, 1947), p. 75; henceforth Hb. "A Letter on Humanism", trans. Frank A. Capuzzi and J. Glenn Gray, in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (London: Routledge, 1978); henceforth BW.
- 18 For one such reaction, see John Caputo, "Heidegger's Scandal: Thinking and the Essence of the Victim", in *The Heidegger Case*, eds. Tom Rockmore and Joseph Margolis (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1992), pp. 265–281.
- 19 In *Ethics and Responsibility in the Phenomenological Tradition*, Ninth Annual Symposium of the Simon Silverman Phenomenology Center (Duquesne, 1992), pp. 57–90.

- 20 *Totalité et infini* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1968), p. 108; henceforth TeI. *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969), p. 134; henceforth TI.
- 21 *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974), p. 71; henceforth AE. *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), p. 55; henceforth OB.
- 22 In "The Ethics of Suspicion", Robert Bernasconi notes that Levinas uses this image on at least nine different occasions in *Otherwise than Being; Research in Phenomenology*, 20 (1991), p. 4 and p. 16, n. 2.
- 23 Keeping in mind that, as Derrida points out, "by *existent (existant)*, in effect, Levinas almost if not always understands the being which is man, being in the form of *Dasein*" (ED, p. 133/WD, p. 88).
- 24 C. D. Keyes, in "An Evaluation of Levinas' Critique of Heidegger", also uses the term "irresponsibility" with reference to one of Levinas' critical comments on Heidegger. *Research in Phenomenology*, 2 (1972), p. 133.
- 25 Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1993.
- 26 See *Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, trans. Michael Heim (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984), pp. 181–185. I discuss this point at length in *Forms of Transcendence: Heidegger and Medieval Mystical Theology*, forthcoming, SUNY Press. See also Klaus Brinkman, "Heidegger and Jaspers on Plato's Idea of the Good", in *Heidegger and Jaspers*, ed. Alan M. Olson (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1994), pp. 111–125.
- 27 "An Evaluation of Levinas' Critique of Heidegger", p. 132.
- 28 Einführung in die Metaphysik (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1987), p. 124. *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987), pp. 162–163
- 29 See note 18.
- 30 Quoted by Caputo, pp. 266, 277.
- 31 In *Totality and Infinity*, he calls rhetoric "the position of him who approaches his neighbour with ruse" (TeI, p. 42/TI, p. 70), and claims that "justice coincides with the overcoming of rhetoric" (TeI, p. 44/TI, p. 72).
- 32 Stephen G. Smith makes a similar point about Levinas and rhetoric, arguing that "his entire philosophy is deliberately and self-consciously rhetorical", in a positive sense. "Reason as One For Another", in *Face to Face with Levinas*, ed. Richard Cohen (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1986), pp. 67–69, p. 71, n. 41. Cf. also David E. Klemm's discussion of the various voices in *Totality and Infinity* through which "Levinas actually performs his theme rather than merely speaking about it". "Levinas' Phenomenology of the Other and Language as the Other of Phenomenology", *Man and World*, 22 (1989), pp. 406ff.
- 33 Robert Bernasconi makes this point in "Habermas and Arendt on the Philosopher's 'Error': Tracking the Diabolical in Heidegger", (*Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, 14 [1991], pp. 3–24), where he says: "Heidegger's failings, which extend beyond the political and the moral, to thinking itself, reflect not just on him, or on a school of philosophy, but on the very ideal of the Western philosophical tradition as a way of life. This idea constitutes a conviction about philosophy so deeply held that only a philosopher's apparent blindness to events as cataclysmic as those witnessed in Europe in the middle of the century could destroy it. Here is an end of philosophy, of philosophy's self-conception" (pp. 20–21).
- 34 "Simone Weil contre la Bible", in *Difficile Liberté*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Albin Michel, 1976), p. 183.
- 35 "Heidegger, Gagarine et nous", in *Difficile Liberté*, p. 301.
- 36 "It is a matter of an existence that accepts itself as natural, for which its place in the sun, its soil, its place orient all meaning. It is a matter of *pagan* existence." *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1967), p. 170.
- 37 "Dieu et la philosophie", *Le Nouveau Commerce*, 30/31 (1975), p. 127; henceforth DP. "God and Philosophy", trans. Richard A. Cohen and Alphonso Lingis, in *The Levinas Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), p. 186; henceforth GP.
- 38 An example is the model of dialogue presented in "A Dialogue on Language", the caution with which he addresses the other here, with an awareness of the limitations imposed by the definiteness of every language. In *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1971), pp. 1–54.
- 39 See "Questions et reponses", *Le Nouvel Commerce*, 36/37 (1977), p. 72.

- 40 I am not overlooking the role of *le tiers* in Levinas' later conception of justice, whose presence introduces comparison and judgement in relation to the need for equity. In "Questions et réponses", he says: "The word 'justice' is actually much more appropriate where what is required is not my 'subordination' to the other, but 'equity'" (p. 66). With the appearance of the third person, opposition to another may be justified—but *still not* on behalf of myself. Rather, for Levinas, "my resistance begins when the evil which [the other] does me is done to a third who is also my neighbour" ("Questions et réponses", p. 68).
- 41 "Postscript" to "What is Metaphysics?" trans. R. F. C. Hull and Alan Crick, in *Existence and Being* (London: Vision Press, 1968), pp. 384–386.
- 42 See, for example, "The Thing", in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1971), pp. 163–186; esp. p. 182.
- 43 E.g., in "The Thinker as Poet", in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, pp. 1–14.
- 44 "Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes", in *Holzwege* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1980), p. 42; "The Origin of the Work of Art", in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, p. 56.
- 45 See Hölderlin's Hymnen "Germanien" und "Der Rhein", Gesamtausgabe, Vol. 39 (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1980), p. 84.
- 46 For an explication of Levinas' understanding of being, existence and essence as realities opposed to the good, see Catherine Chalié, "Ontologie et mal", in *Emmanuel Lévinas: L'éthique comme philosophie première*, Colloque de Cerisy-la-Salle sous la direction de Jean Greisch et Jacques Rolland (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1993), pp. 63–78.
- 47 See "Addendum" to "The Origin of the Work of Art", *Poetry, Language, Thought*, p. 82; and "What are Poets For?", *Poetry, Language, Thought*, pp. 119–121.
- 48 "Memory of the Camps", PBS Frontline Series (WGBH Educational Foundation, 1985). The film was made in 1945, but only discovered 40 years later, in the archives of the Imperial War Museum in London. The sequences to which I am referring were filmed around Belsen and Ebensee. Speaking of prisoners in the camp at Ebensee, one line in the script runs, "They were able to see the mountains, but what use are mountains without food?" (Most of the soundtracks for the film are missing, but the script for the narration was found. In the *Frontline* version, this script is read by Trevor Howard.)
- 49 Expressed most fully in "Reality and its Shadow", trans. Sean Hand in *The Levinas Reader*, pp. 129–143.
- 50 See John Llewellyn's discussion of this point in *The Middle Voice of Ecological Conscience* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1991), pp. 109–113.
- 51 Such themes were also present in the 1937 Nazi exhibition, "Entartete Kunst". Examples are Lovis Corinth's "Ecce Homo" (1925), Christoph Voll's "Vier Knaben und ein kleines Kind" (1919/24), and Ludwig Gies' "Kruzifixus" (ca. 1921). The grotesque realities of war are also brutally portrayed in some of the paintings by Otto Dix hung in this exhibition, although the organizers clearly did not understand Dix's attempt, influenced by Nietzsche, to reflect coldly rather than judge. This incomprehension is evident in the pamphlet accompanying the exhibition which, with obvious reference to Dix's "Kriegskrüppel" (1920) and "Der Schützengraben" (1920/23), condemns art that destroys respect for the heroic military virtues. Reproductions of these pieces can be found in "Entartete Kunst": *Das Schicksal der Avantgarde im Nazi-Deutschland*, ed. Stephanie Barron (New York, NY: Museum Associates, Los Angeles Museum of Art, 1992); p. 37 (Gies), p. 38 (Corinth), pp. 57 and 373 (Dix), p. 369 (Voll). The text, in the original pamphlet, directed towards the section in which the above-mentioned works by Dix were displayed, is reproduced on pp. 370–372 of this book. Two books containing selections of holocaust art are: *Spiritual Resistance: Art from Concentration Camps, 1940-1945*, with essays by Miriam Novitch, Lucy Dawidowicz, Tom L. Freudenheim (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1981); and Janet Butler and Sybil Milton, *Art of the Holocaust* (New York, NY: The Rutledge Press, 1981).
- 52 Trans. H. M. Parshley (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968), p. xvi, n. 3.
- 53 "Who is my neighbour?" in *Ethics and Responsibility in the Phenomenological Tradition*, pp. 7–8.
- 54 Trans. Margaret Whitford, in *Re-Reading Levinas*, eds. Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991), pp. 109–118.