

Heidegger's Ethics and Levinas' Ontology

By Martin Gak

“Of all the prosperous crowd, count none a happy man before he die,”
Hecuba in Euripides. *Trojan Women*

Levinas' attack on the putative primordality of ontology has spawned among some of his readers a curious form of Manichaeism, which associates ethics with the good and ontology—in broad strokes—with a deviation from some presumably dutiful deference to the priority of the Other. This reading assumes, first, that ‘ethics’, for Levinas, is synonymous with goodness and, second, that to act ethically is nothing more and nothing less than to ‘respect the alterity of the other’ by suspending *totalization*. The advocates of this *pious Levinas* seem to take his entire metaphysical project to be the philosophical scaffolding to just one normative principle: *thou shall not totalize*. Thus, questions about what one ought to do seem reasonably easy to resolve: actions are ‘ethical’ when they defer to the mysterious infinity of the other and bad when they reify it in ontological categories.

These readers take the critique advanced in the pages of *Totality and Infinity (TI)* and of *Otherwise than Being (OB)* to be nothing but a complete and final rejection of ontology. However, the substantive normative claims entailed in this apparent vilification of ontology as a cognitive drive, attribute to Levinas a moral theory that is, at best, hard to pinpoint in his work and at worst in direct conflict with the radical priority of ethics which is normally taken—often, even by those same readers—to anchor the entire Levinasian project. Indeed if we take seriously the claim that ethics is constitutive

of all acts—that ethics is first philosophy, as it is so often repeated—then it turns out that no act can be said to stand beyond the scope of ethics, not even totalization.

The political agenda of *the pious readers* has had as much to do with an understandable need for a philosophically solid account of morality with its accompanying theory of action as with a rather quaint form of virtuous indignation in reaction to Heidegger. Indeed, Heidegger's political biography has made him an easy target for moralizing Levinasians. These readers seem to think that the existential analytic of *Dasein* is what the Nazi agenda was truly all about, so in this regard, the political stakes of the confrontation could hardly be higher. Ethics and ontology are not mere philosophical categories employed in the articulation of a phenomenology of rule-following and action-guidance; these terms stand at the antipodes of the twentieth century political spectrum as the metaphysical expressions of evil and—by simple contrast—good. So not only is to behave ethically to respect the incalculable 'otherness of the other' but more notably, to totalize is not only to engage in a hopeless metaphysical venture but, more perversely, to align oneself philosophically with Nazism and its crimes. Understandably, then, the pious reading takes Levinas' account of the primordially of ethics as a radical and, for obvious reasons, righteous departure from Heidegger's fundamental ontology.

The added benefit of this approach is that it tends to liberate—exculpate, perhaps—Levinas' thought from its pre-war Heideggerian commitments that—should those who take *Being and Time* as a propaedeutic to the National Socialist program be correct—would put the French phenomenologist in a notably uncomfortable political

position. Both the Heideggerian Levinas of the Freiburg years as well as the one of *Totality and Infinity*, whose book continues “paying a ceaseless attention to *Sein und Zeit*” cannot, according to this reading of *Being and Time*, but have some markedly Nazi sympathies. In any case, if *Ethics* for the pious reader is good is because Heidegger’s ontology is already—*always already*—bad. This reading is, of course, notably expedient and thoroughly misguided.

I will not undertake here a discussion on the merits of what we may call the ‘human interest’ approach to the Heideggerian corpus, which doubtlessly makes for fascinating reading. Questions of political affiliations aside, what I set out to do in this paper is merely to show that just as a strong proto-Levinasian streak is easily detectable in a charitable reading of Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, Levinas’ metaphysics are constructed on the edifice of epistemological underpinnings advanced in that work’s analytics of *Dasein* and, partly, on its epistemic normativity.

In these pages, I intend to show that the constitutive character of Levinas’ account of pre-ontological normativity as well as its subsequent ontological articulation in *totalization*, may well be read as a vindication of Heidegger’s account of the constitutive primordially of the implicit normative force of others in *Dasein*’s everyday modes of being and their posterior ontological thematization. (Heidegger, 68) To this avail, I will focus on what I believe are the two fundamental mechanisms to both metaphysics so as to map their relation: pre-ontological normativity—explained in Heidegger as *Mitsein* and in Levinas as the encounter with the Other—and its ontological, meaning theoretical, articulation—expressed as *ontology* in Heidegger and *totalization* in Levinas. I will argue

that while evidently central to Heidegger's concerns, the cognitive demand of self and others is ultimately also central to Levinas. My stronger and presumably more controversial claim will be that this demand—which is openly stated in both of Levinas' major works—amounts to a vindication of *totalization* though, in my view, an insufficient one.

As a final note and given the fact that the archeological excavation of the Heideggerian text in search of proto-Levinasian traces entails a taking of positions in relation to the way in which Heidegger ought to be read, it would seem that a few clarificatory remarks are in order here. In general, my position with respect to *Being and Time* can be simply put as the straight rejection of the idea that “in *Sein und Zeit*... there is a tension between a decisionist notion of individual authenticity and a collectivist conception of interpersonal authenticity.” (Inquiry, 439) This, in my view, is a gross misreading, which wittingly or unwittingly fails to notice the fact that *Eigentlichkeit* is an epistemological category and not a moral one, and that ontology as its cognitive mode is, for Heidegger, a principle of reflexive individuation and not the aim of a philosophical soteriology. Thus, the ‘authentic appropriation’—or, alternatively, rejection—of one's own culture and history, of one's proclaimed destiny, is, first and foremost, an individual act of self-articulation. This, of course, could yield all sorts of ontological tales, the most benign to the most malign. So notwithstanding Heidegger's own political shortcomings, there is nothing in *Being and Time*, which evidently suggests a *fascist* agenda. Rather, the Heideggerian project ought to be read as an attempt to show the emergence of individuation from the bind of the united fuses. Indeed, we can unequivocally say that

there is a markedly anti-collectivist—severely anti-populist—normative claim underlying Heidegger’s great book though the same cannot be said for Levinas. To this point, we shall return towards the end of the paper.

Heidegger’s Ethics

Even a cursory reading of *Being and Time* is bound to reveal a well-defined presentation of pre-deliberative normativity anticipating many of the critical mechanisms worked out by Levinas both in *TI* and in *OB*. In fact, Heidegger’s entire philosophical architecture finds its ground and object of inquiry in the account of the pre-ontological normative force that others exert upon *Dasein* and its posterior interpretative thematization as ontology.

While Heidegger resonates loudly throughout the Levinasian corpus, especially in the early works in which Levinas’ phenomenological commitments are more evidently present, Levinas’ commentators often fail to notice that in Heidegger’s *Being and Time* one can find a frequently clear exposition of the constitutive importance of pre-ontological existence alongside others. It is here where I will begin my discussion.

In the face of the broadly misconstrued emergence of *Eigentlichkeit* in later parts of the book, it seems useful to remind ourselves of the positive constitutive importance that the Ontic has for the ontological elucidation of being in the Heideggerian landscape. Succinctly, the core of the Heideggerian analytic project consists in the interpretation (*Auslegung*) of implicit categories of meaning in habitual practices. The most fundamental practice that Heidegger is concerned with is the application—multifarious,

uneven and confused and yet ubiquitous—of the concept ‘*being*’. The fundamental impossibility to access the metaphysical category—the truth-maker of all or any existential predications—and the all-pervasiveness of the term in all human affairs makes visible the fact that the prevalence of ‘being’ is first and foremost, the prevalence of a form or forms of meaning. Indeed, “the term ‘being’ [is] only a provisional and ultimately misleading way of saying ‘meaning’” and this goes to say that ontology—the study of being—would be more properly approached as the study of a peculiar and fundamental form of meaning. (Sheehan, 42) It is then with good reason that Taylor Carman, for instance, places *explicit understanding* of implicit categories at the very core of Heidegger’s analytic project. (Carman, 1) The program of fundamental ontology concerns the explicit understanding of the implicit average meaning of ‘being’ in its varied and dissimilar incarnations. And, importantly, it is the domain in which these average meanings are deployed and the manner and function of their application that is bound to be the object of such interpretation. This domain is the space of the ontic, in which the average meanings of being—though not the metaphysical entity—are phenomenally available.

In “The Ontical Priority of the Question of Being”—*Section 4* of the first introduction—after announcing the ontological calling of *Dasein*, Heidegger puts in no uncertain terms the mundane foundations of *Dasein*’s ontological vocation. He writes:

Fundamental ontology, from which alone all other ontologies can take their rise, must be sought in the existential analytic of *Dasein* (...). The roots of the existential analytic, on its part, are ultimately existentiell,

that is, ontical. (Heidegger, 34)

The object of the existential analysis that *Dasein* undertakes is the everyday world which is customarily and thoughtlessly articulated through average, generic and unreflected ways of meaning *being*. Ontology is its theoretical articulation, the explicit understanding of these ways of meaning *being*. And because primarily “*Dasein* is absorbed”—fascinated, Heidegger will more emphatically say—“in the world”, ontology will have to account for this fascination and its object. (Heidegger, 149) Thus, ontology is the above-average understanding of the “average understanding of being in which we always operate and *which in the end belongs to the essential constitution of Dasein*”. (Heidegger, 28, *my emphasis*) A second order cognition.

The world in which *Dasein* is absorbed in its pre-ontological life and which is not just the object of this budding phenomenology but also the constitutive ground and substance of Heidegger’s epistemological subject itself, has some decidedly proto-Levinasian features. I will briefly turn to what to me is the most relevant one, the manner in which others are normatively constitutive of the ontic and its categories and for this reason, the implicit object of the subject’s explicit self-understanding.

In the ontic stance, *Dasein* as an ontological theme is merely incipient and in this pre-ontological mode *Dasein* “in itself is essentially being-with”. (Heidegger, 156) At this stage, *others* define and enforce the norms of doing by defining the principles of the deployment of the average meaning of being. The importance of *being* as a cognitive device is its explicit or implicit entailment in all domains of human doing irrespective of the degree of rational awareness.

The *norms of meaning* that regulate one's action in the ontic stance are tacit and for the most part invisible. Defining both the topology and demography of what will become Levinas' metaphysical locus, Heidegger describes a world in which others are normatively more primordial—certainly phenomenologically more primordial; pre-phenomenal according to Heidegger (Heidegger, 96)—than explicit awareness, than ontology, that is, and are encountered as “what they do”. In this way, the doing of others guide the actions of the incipient subject prior to choice. This, I would like to argue, is the epicenter of Heidegger's *ethics*, which as we shall shortly see shares the most important feature of Levinas' foundational account of normativity, namely, a pre-deliberative mode of rule-following to which ontology—rule thematization and explicit rule learning—is only posterior.

Such posterior self-interpretation and ontological thematization of *Dasein* ontic mode of being is the interpretation of being-with and thus the interpretation of the doing of others as the exogenous source of the subject's *ways of meaning*. And in so far as the ontic mode of being is where the categories which configure the meaning of the term *being* are forged, “*Dasein*'s Being is Being-with, its understanding of Being already implies the understanding of Others”. (Heidegger, 161) So “the world” as the implicit articulation of *being* as a way of meaning “is”—irreparably, we may add—“indicative of others”. (Heidegger, 154) However, others and the things of the world that indicate them are not phenomenally available in the same fashion.

The distinctive character of the human other that will be of such central importance to Levinas was also of fundamental relevance to Heidegger for whom the

other is neither ‘a thing ready-to-hand nor nature present-at-hand giving itself to the deficient ontology of things’. (Heidegger, 155-156) According to Heidegger, the relation to object of the world is characterized by *concern* (*Besorge*) while the relation to the other is characterized by what he calls solicitude (*Fursorge*).

Entities towards which *Dasein* as *Being-with* comports itself do not have the kind of Being which belongs to equipment ready-to-hand, they are *Dasein*. These entities are not objects of concern but rather of *solicitude* [*Fürsorge*].(Heidegger, 157)

Heidegger describes three general modes of solicitude broadly divided into two categories: a positive and a negative one. The negative mode of solicitude, however, is the more significant one, in the context of this discussion, in that it is precisely these “modes that characterize everyday, average Being-with-one-another”. (Heidegger, 158) In it, the others are not visible to the subject as individuated others but rather belong to a general and communal identity defined by practices which in their pervasiveness stand beyond scrutiny and examination. (Heidegger, 161) “Solicitude dwells proximally and for the most part in the deficient or at least the Indifferent modes (in the indifference of passing one another by)” and this indifference guarantees the inscrutability and solidity of the norms that guide the habitual practices of the community. (Heidegger, 161) In this sense, the negative form of solicitude prevalent in the customary ways of meaning *being* the fact that being—including the being thoughtlessly attributed to others—is an instrument of predication pegged on what is phenomenally available gets lost and the mantle of being as an ontological category is allowed to cover everything. For this

reason, “these modes of being show again the characteristics of inconspicuousness and obviousness which belong just as much to the everyday *Dasein*-with of Others within-the-world as to the readiness-to-hand of the equipment with which it is daily concerned.” (Heidegger, 158)

This average deployment of *being's* meaning is the one guided and defined by other's customary use and in this customary use the breathtaking disparity of its application—‘the window *is* dirty’, ‘love *is* blind’ and ‘god is infinite’—justifiable consequent suspicion that the term may not have a single ontological referent is completely lost from view. The more prevalent and normal the practice is, the less visible its normative force becomes and thus the more effective it is. Rules that are not represented seem merely descriptive much in the manner of law of nature. However, rules that are represented---normally prescriptively—issue traces of alternative possibilities and this means that they demand deliberation and as such they summon reason. In the ontic stage, the rules of *being's* meaning So in the ontic, it is the force of customary doing as “normal *people*” (*Das Man*) do. (Heidegger, 158)

We take pleasure and enjoy ourselves as *people* take pleasure; we read, see, and judge about literature and art as *people* see and judge...The *people* which is nothing definite and which all of it is, though not as a sum, prescribe the kind of Being of everydayness. (Heidegger, 164 with my modifications: *das Man* as people and my emphasis)

Towards the end of Chapter 4, Heidegger presents in more detail his account of

this foundational exogenous normativity, which has been often and mistakenly read—in my view—as his indictment of the ontic.

The normalizing element which accounts for the pre-prescriptive normativity of ‘people’ (*das Man*) is a form of competitive calculation, which Heidegger calls *Abständigkeit*—overmaturation or decay. Overmaturation—even as an exacerbation of psychological maturity—governs the subjection of *Dasein* to the normal and average by asserting the propriety of the regular ways of meaning. (Heidegger, 164) The voluntary or involuntary engagement with others in all matters pertaining to social life demand a mature acquiescence to the standards of meaning defined by ‘people’. One does not choose these modes of meaning but rather falls into this dynamic of meaning defined by others by being born into a socio-cultural context. And acculturation and socialization as the process by which maturation is measured, force the participation of the subject in this tacit game of invisible rules, which eventually *Dasein* will help to impose upon others by thoughtlessly enhancing *people’s* power. (Heidegger, 164) *Dasein* is compelled to play this game of tacit prescriptions, which is always dominated by the silent demand of normalcy. *Dasein* inadvertently complies doing as ‘people do’ and deploys and demands of others the deployment of *being’s* customary meaning.

In this place of customary practices, *Dasein* gets lost in tacit prescriptions of others and individual others become dissolved in the ignominious contingent that we call *people* when we justify courses of action saying things such as: ‘that is just what *people* do’. *Dasein’s* identity is lost or diluted in the public identity—publicness, as Heidegger puts it—of ‘people’ (*Das Mann*) as they collectively perform according to normal

practices of interpretation that suspend the deliberative independence of the subject. These rules of meaning define a collective identity and gently—imperceptibly—suppress the concerns, needs and rational aptitude of *Dasein* as an individual autonomous subject. This phenomenon of thoughtless, everyday engagement with things of the world governed by the categories of being as meant in the collective identity of our respective cultures is the phenomenon of being *fallen* (Heidegger, 223).

The tacit orders that issue from this normalcy—do as *people* do!—cannot be said to truly belong to *Dasein*. Heidegger, indeed, points out that in this mode of being, *Dasein* “is not itself”. In this mode of being, “*Dasein*’s everyday possibilities of Being are for the Others to dispose of as they please”. (Heidegger, 164) Such *subjection* of *Dasein* to the performative identity and authority of *people* obviates individual *responsibility* (*Verantwortlichkeit*) by negating the subject’s deliberative autonomy and in doing this it yields a collective subject more primary than the rational one. (Heidegger, 164) It is for this reason that “in this mode one’s way of Being is that of *impropriety* and failure to stand by one’s Self.” (Heidegger, 166) So in a line that may well have been written by Levinas himself, albeit with a slightly different thrust, Heidegger says that in this stage “everyone is other, and no one is himself”. (Heidegger, 165) In this, Heidegger is simply following Husserl for whom to be a subject is to exist for oneself in self-awareness. (Zahavi, 2)

It is important, however, not to confuse the concept of impropriety—*Uneigentlichkeit*—with a moral category. This mode of being is best understood as the dilution of the *ownership* or *propriety*—*Eigene*—of actions and of

self-determination in the dominance and authority of normalcy of one's socio-cultural context:

Neither must we take the fallenness of *Dasein* as a “fall” from a purer and higher “primal status”. Not only do we lack and experience of this ontically, but ontologically we lack any possibilities or clues for interpreting it. (Heidegger, 220)

In fact, there is nothing exotic or unusual about this type of performative thoughtlessness. In its customary dealings with the world, the subject acquiesces uncritically to the normal ways of doing of *people* and in so doing its deliberative autonomy is rendered moot by the tacit acceptance of these performative impositions and thus of the identity of the group. This is the disposition that characterizes our most mundane activities in which the normalizing force of our respective cultures is both most forceful and best concealed.

Nonetheless, these norms, are never entirely seamless and the sudden realization of the contingent nature of these rules for meaning *being* summons the rational attention of the subject. In encountering alternative rules for the deployment of meaning in other socio-cultural contexts or by the misapplication of the category alternative choices become apparent to *Dasein* which must be negotiated by rational adjudication and elucidation. Here, the automatic and imperceptible deployment of customary way of meaning—socially, culturally, historically determined—is disrupted and the cognitive demand emerges calling for their ontological analysis.

The ontological project consists in moving from the ontic mode of public identity

defined by pre-reflective performativity to its rational and deliberate appropriation or rejection. In this sense, *Eigentlichkeit*, as propriety or ownership, is the autonomous and voluntary approach to the ontic—the inceptive exogenous rules that guide customary actions—dominated by the explicit awareness that is lacking from within. Despite intimations of all sorts concerning what Heidegger names “the call of being”, we are not to find in *Being and Time* a systematic account of the disruption which stands as the central mechanism binding the ontic to the ontological, that is, thrusting the pre-reflective normativity of *Dasein*’s public identity into the eye of reason. Nor do we have a compelling account of the way in which *Dasein* is brought back to the everyday to seamlessly deal in average categories. For that, we will turn now to Levinas who in giving a rich account of the interstice which binds the two stages may be said to have written *Being and Time*’s *Deduction and Schematism*.

Levinas’ ontology

Three elements define Levinas’ ontology aligning it with Heidegger. The first one is the presence in this metaphysics of a pre-ontological stage, which, as in Heidegger, both grounds and provides the content for ontological articulation. The second element is the temporal constitution of the act of *totalization* that collects the pre-epistemic flux of experience into a finalized and thus unified totality of meaning available to consciousness. The third element is the disruption of the ontological by the reemergence of the pre-ontological which poses a new epistemological demand on the subject to concoct new totalities by the redeployment of an intentional act of objectification which

produces meaning. It is this third element that stands at the center of both the Heideggerian and the Levinasian accounts binding the pre-reflective with the reflective stance. The substantive elucidation of the way in which this disruption poses a demand for reflective articulation is notoriously absent from *Being and Time*. So I would like to suggest that Levinas' two major works ought to be read as providing the phenomenological elaboration of the normative nature of the encounter of the Other as the central mechanism holding both systems together. Let us first turn to the pre-ontological in Levinas.

Following Heideggerian suit and grounding ontology on intentionality results in two configurations that necessarily Levinas must share with his teacher: ontology is subtended by epistemology and the epistemological act that produces the meaningful unities that populate ontology must have an object. Since that object of intentionality cannot be meaningfully unified a priori without already presupposing intentionality, Levinas as Heidegger, must accept a meta-intentional or pre-ontological object.

To a great degree, Levinas' place in the phenomenological tradition is established by his protracted phenomenological thematization of the apparently unthematizable pre-ontological grounds of all ontology. As Heidegger, Levinas takes *Being* to be, first and foremost, meaning and devotes most of his works rehearsing an explanation of how is it that meaning gets off the ground. If ontology is the physiognomic expression of an epistemic device, ontology as a product of epistemology cannot possibly be primordial and questions about the grounds and sources of a putative *being* which grounds its meaning—the pre-ontological—can partially be set aside.

The idea that the world and its presumed ontological solidity are *meaning* can be traced through the phenomenological tradition back to the Kantian transcendental deduction. But the direct forerunner of Levinas' version of *world as meaning* which sits at the core of his metaphysics belongs to Levinas' teacher, Heidegger. In fact, the inception of Levinas' *totalization* can be traced back to the admittedly Heideggerian reading of Husserl presented in the third chapter of the young Levinas' doctoral work. In explaining Levinas' treatment of Husserl, Theodor Peperzak writes in *Beyond, the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*:

Due to Husserl's new conception of reality in its relation to consciousness (or of consciousness as "intending" reality), Being is "defined" as meaning (*Sinn*) in its givenness to consciousness. Being is neither an appearance behind which some thing or some structure is ruling or happening, not anything behind the appearances, but that which is meaningfully present to consciousness. (Peperzak, 40)

Totalization, the completed product of the objectifying act of intentionality, is the fundamental mechanism in the constitution of Levinas' subject. (TI, 122) For the subject, experience is all that is present to consciousness but, as for Heidegger, for Levinas, consciousness is not exhaustive and cannot account for its own content without sliding into an improvable solipsism. So the importance, for both, of the transcendental in Husserl's model is that it provides these new metaphysical accounts with a concrete exterior anchoring world to be the raw material from which intentionality can build their respective ontologies. In the Husserlian account, the meaningful world is not merely the product of idealism but rather the result of the encounter of an intentional disposition in

the subject and a raw concreteness beyond it. Husserl—emphasizing the role of the Kantian noumenal in a theory of knowledge—will have provided both models with pre-epistemological content. Levinas points this out in discussing Husserl’s idea of intentionality:

It expresses only the...general fact that consciousness transcends itself, that it directs itself towards something other than itself, that it has a sense. (THIH 44)

Consciousness is not simply rational adjudication turned towards its own inert representations of objects giving themselves motionlessly to mental depictions. Rather, the objectifying acts are the ways in which the fluctuating and diffuse contents of perception are collected into a whole that in raw perception—if available to reason—is nowhere to be found. The meaning that issues from these objectifying acts of intentionality is the very manner in which the world *is* for the subject. Experience, the world, is first and foremost a collection of meaningful unities collected by way of the subject’s intentional orientation towards the otherwise fluctuating turmoil of perception and indeed, both for Heidegger and Levinas, “intentionality is constitutive of all form of consciousness”. (TITH, 45)

So for the young Heideggerian Levinas, Husserl’s *being* is first and foremost defined as meaning resulting from the intentional act of objectification. This idea remains virtually intact in the pages of *TI*, where *totalization* can be readily unmasked to show its Husserlian pedigree. But in this work the echoes of the epistemological foundation of totalization as the intentional constitution of the objects of experience takes a more markedly Heideggerian tone in that temporality becomes a central element of the

objectifying act of intentionality.

The emergence of temporality in Levinas has to do with the way in which the intentional act of objectification is contrasted with the feral motility of the world fluctuating in perception. Early in the preface to *TI*, Levinas allude to Heraclitus' idea of the subjection of form to form in the struggle in which movement defaces unities. The general idea of *being* that grounds Levinas' ontology is this Heraclitean struggle of forms in the fluctuation of being in perception. In perception no form persists in time and the emergence of any one of them amounts to the defacement of the previous one in the material substrata sequentially hosting them. But despite the fact that no given form is final in a process of constant fluctuation, meaning must take—against all perceptive evidence—any given form as a finalized totality. For Heraclitus—and with him Plato and all other Parmenideans—this bespeaks the shortcomings of all perception and appearance for their incapacity to grasp the ontological stability and persistence of their true being. For the inheritors of Husserl's act of objectifying intentionality, this bespeaks the constitutive role of the intentional act. The absence of ontologically stable unities in perception shows that totalized unities are rather conceptual wholes indigenous to the subject. A struggle between the fluctuating pre-cognitive disarray of perceptive data and the cognitive agent striving to resolve meaning comes to an end in the declared subjection of perception to stable meaning.

When in the opening pages of *TI* Levinas explains that to reason, “being reveals itself as war”, he is, in fact, referring to the tension between the impression of ontological persistence and perceptive volatility. (TI, 21) However, for him this war is not a

conflagration of forms in struggle over material substrates but rather a confrontation between the subject and the wildly fluctuating content of perceptions. This vocation of epistemic subjugation is expressed in the intentional orientation towards alterity in general and it is one that seeks to “feed on these realities” so—as it has been widely cited—“their *alterity* is thereby reabsorbed into my own identity as a thinker or a possessor“.(TI 33)The subject is nourished and built by integrating the pre-reflective into ontologized reflection in the encounter of a world that opposes resistance to his epistemic will and it is precisely in the subject’s epistemological exertion to make sense of this pre-ontological raw material that the world is appropriated as an articulated collection of meaningful wholes. So, in this regard, “all ontological relations to that which is other are relations of comprehension and form totalities” (Critchley, 13)

The purported end of this struggle is the declaration of the end of fluctuation: the totalization of meaning. The act of intentional objectification amounts to the subject’s declaration of epistemic victory over the pre-epistemic ignominy of indefinite change: at the end of the struggle, the feral flux of perceptive data is proclaimed to be completed and domesticated into the tame meaning of ‘being a one of something’. (Plotinus, 6,9,1) In the opening pages of *TI*, Levinas provides a first sketch of the way in which this sense of temporality defines the act of totalization when, alluding to Heraclitus, he says that in the dispute between data and reason, the only possible truth is the eschatological cessation of ontological hostilities in the immobile picture of the history of battle:

Individuals are reduced to being bearers of force that command them unbeknown to themselves. The meaning of individuals (invisible outside of this totality) is derived

from the totality. The unicity of each present is incessantly sacrificed to a future appealed to bring forth its objective meaning. For the ultimate meaning alone counts; the last act alone changed being into themselves. They are what they will appear to be in the already plastic forms of the epic. (TI, 22)

Because a stable and persistent being is incompatible with the indefinite mutation of the objects of perception, the intentional act of objectification must also amount to a proclamation—kerygma is how Levinas puts it—of the end of fluctuations in the resolution of a stable and persistent unity whose meaning is completed as object and epistemically exhaustible as an identity. This declaration must assume itself to stand beyond the time at which the fluctuation prevented the completion of the unified totalities. This is the epic narration of the struggle and the eschatological temporality where the meaning of being is declared to be guaranteed and safe. The integrity of any one being is possible only once that the unity of its form is no longer compromised by the threat of change. In this cognitive mode, the perceptive data that anchors the objectifying act is deprived of motility and is purportedly narrated for posterity. This stipulation of the totalized, completed and thus stable whole that issues in the intentional object furnishes the world of the subject with a tame and calculable environment made of immobile wholes. This docility is the one that belongs to the ontological menagerie—much like Heidegger’s own—of what Levinas calls the messianic peace of eschatology, the time of the survivor. (TI, 26)

The objectifying act is, in essence, a kerygmatic act of preterization—a proclamation of the present as completed past—and it is from this proclamation that ‘the

meaning of individuals is derived'. So the constitution of the subject's meaningful world, alternatively presented as nourishment, enjoyment, historization or eschatology, seems in essence to amount to the objectifying intentionality as a production of *past*:

For to know objectively is to know the historical, the *fact*, the *already happened*, the already passed by. The historical is not defined by the past; both the historical and the past are defined as themes of which one can speak. They (the past and the historical) are thematized precisely because they no longer speak. (TI, 65)

But as all proclamations, the objectifying preterization is by and large pretense. The purported irrevocability of this epic history and the emergence of the victorious epistemic agent, who is now the conqueror and possessor of meaning, is merely stipulative. Insofar as the content of sense-perception continues to change, the ontological battle has indeed not ended and any given unity is capable of disruptive novelty. Meaning will, inexorably, be interrupted and no proposition is final. This interruption of meaning is the interruption of the world populated by totalized meanings.

The said is the generic articulation of the narrative mode of ontology that will come to take the place of nourishment and enjoyment in the presentation of the subject in *OB*. The first systematic introduction of the term occurs in the 1967 essay "Language and Proximity" but in *Totality and Infinty*, the term *Said* makes an important but rather inconspicuous appearance. At the very end of the preface in what looks like a slightly lyrical apology for the text that introduces the work, Levinas writes:

The word by way of preface...belongs to the very essence of language, which consists in continually undoing its

phrase by the foreword or the exegesis, in unsaying the said, in attempting to restate without ceremonies what has already been ill understood in the inevitable ceremonial in which the said delights. (TI, 30)

Language here is shown in two lights. On the one hand, language as what has already been said presents a completed landscape of meaningful unities in which its contents, terms and concepts have well defined meaning. What has been said has a fixed meaning that now merely needs to be deciphered properly. However, in its other mode, language is a disruptive mechanism that unravels the pretended solidity of the *authentic* meaning, what was 'said'. The paradox of the foreword and the exegesis and, by extension, of language in general, is that in 'attempting to restate' what will be said, these addendums—as further clarificatory 'sayings'—negate the voice of the text-, so to say.

Levinas carries this mechanism of the temporal constitution of ontology into *OB*. In his second major work, the mechanism of preterization in which totalized meaningful unities are concocted remains virtually intact.

However, the original tale of ontological characters is replaced by a prolonged elucidation of the temporality of language and meaning. This emphasis on the centrality of language that was already adumbrated, if not fully developed in *TI*, provides, in my view, a more glaring expression of the epistemological character of Levinas peculiar brand of ethics. In this reprise of the relation between the temporal dispersion of events and the temporal unity of meaning—"The ideality of the same in the diverse" (*OB*, 35)—Levinas retrieves the concepts that had timidly made their first appearance in *TI*. The interplay between the two forms of temporality of *said* and *saying* defines the

manner in which the individual persistent identities of meaningful unities are constituted:

[I]dentification is a supplying with meaning: “This as that”.
In their meaning entities show themselves to be identical unities. “The consciousness of time is the originary locus of the constitution of the unity of identity in general,” Husserl writes. The “identical unities” are not given or thematized first, and then receive meaning; they are given through this meaning. (OB, 35)

The persistence of the identity of unities—the persistent identity of the world and its things—is nowhere present in perception let alone persistent across processes of temporal unfolding. Since in time nothing remains the same, the source of such persistent identity can only be found beyond the volatility of the forms that populate perception. The persistence of the unity of identity beyond the Levinasian incarnation of the Heraclietan flux, is, as it had once been for Heidegger, meaning. Ontology is meaning. As in *TI*, the intentional constitution of meaning demands a peculiar form of temporality to suspend the constant fluctuation of perceptive data. Meaning to be persistent must stand beyond change, that is, beyond time. So insofar as time is constant in perception, meaning must produce a temporal bifurcation.

As totalization was in *TI*, the objectifying act in which meaning is produced is an act of historical preterization achieved as narration. However, what in 1961 was a metaphorical articulation of the declared cessation of change in the ontological stability of meaningful totalities, by 1974 had taken a more literal sense. For the Levinas of *OB*, ontology is indeed a historical narration in the broad sense of being the narration of events—*as if*—bygone and completed:

The “this as that” is not lived; it is said. Identification is understood on the basis of a mysterious schematism, of the already said, an antecedent *doxa* which every relationship between the universal and the individual presupposes... Identification is kerygmatical. (OB, 36 with my emphasis)

Language declares itself at the end of the time of the unfolding of ‘lived’ events so “the birthplace of Ontology is in the said” in which the unfolding of saying “enters into history that the said imposes”. (OB 42-43) The features of this temporal bifurcation are defined by the unremitting constancy of time unfolding in the guise of the continuous sayings of others and of oneself, on the one hand, and of the predominance of a calcified and completed meaning which has been *entirely* said and known, on the other.

The possessor of this meaning and knowledge is the subject standing as a narrator who does not participate of that history but is represented in it by its ontologized character, the ‘I’. Even this ‘I’ entails the negation of the saying in which the subject itself speaks. The figure of the survivor used by Levinas in *TI* to portray the subject seems quite appropriate in so far as the subject is the one who talks beyond the end of the time of his objects of narration, even when that object is his very own sayings and doings. This temporal bifurcation that was presented in *TI* as a matter of verticality, is, in *OB* defined in two concomitant temporalities: synchrony and diachrony. The subject himself does not belong in history much like the historian does not belong to the history narrated but rather *owns* that history in which this world—as entirely accounted for—is *his* world, which *he* views and narrates *from nowhere*, so to speak. The preterization of the events, that delivers it to the subject’s I as a *thoroughly known* things—to wit, in a

participial—amounts to the event’s pre-established epistemic availability. That is to say that the event which unfolds across time—diachronically—and in which things are incomplete and fluctuating, is given to the subject as a completed pre-existent wholes liable to epistemic exhaustion. The meaning are mutually synchronous—always already ready to hand. The antecedent doxa of which Levinas speaks is this pre-epistemic availability of the object of knowledge, the apparent ontological preexistence of the things. Or as Heidegger puts it:

Dasein ‘is’ its past in the way of *its* own being, which, to put it roughly, ‘historizes’ out of its future on each occasion... Its own past—and this always means the past of its generation—is not something which *follows along after Dasein*, but something which already goes ahead of it.
(Heidegger, 41)

This rearticulation of Heidegger’s unreflected ontic mode of *being*’s meaning is the mysterious schematism of which Levinas speaks. The synthesis of the dispersion and incompleteness of diachronous perceptions and of the ontological predetermination of the totalized objects that populate the synchronic temporality of ontology. To the extent that the act of thematization that collects the perceptive dispersion of events under the unity of ontological totalities consists in imperceptibly representing the diachronous *as* synchronous, the *saying as said* and the *present as history*, the ontological bias by which persistent unity is imposed upon the content of perception remains itself invisible to the subject. Perhaps it is here that we can see with more clarity the reason why Heidegger attributes such importance to the history of canonic ontology beginning with Parmenides and Herclitus. Informed by Platonic commitments, which we have forgotten to have

assumed, all mereological problems are solved in advance by positing the ontological unity of everything and anything in advance. Heidegger puts it like this:

In addressing...entities as “Things” (res), we have already anticipated their ontological character. (Heidegger, 96)

This anticipation is rather the imposition of ontology upon the fluctuating manifold of perception and indeed, the mysterious schematism consists in fitting the dispersed sense-perceptive data within the intellectual principle of unity. In Kant’s own words: "This mediating representation must be pure (without any empirical content), and yet must on the one side be intellectual, on the other sensuous. Such a representation is the transcendental schema. " (Kant, 143). In fact, representation of unity is entirely void of empirical content though it is posited in advance to resolve the manifold of perception into a mereological unity.

But, insofar as this intentional mechanism of imposing unity upon multiplicity remains concealed from the subject, the schematism remains ‘mysterious’ and metaphysics remains some form of projectivist fallacy. It is now that a mechanism of disruption is called upon in order to make the intentional acts of objectification and their metaphysical prejudices visible to themselves, that is to the objectifying subject.

The Normative force of the Ontico-Ontological Disruption

Incapable of heeding Hecuba’s warning—“tôn d'eudaimonôn mêdena nomizet' eutuchein, prin an thanêi,”—the Levinasian subject unwittingly counts ‘man as happy’

prematurely and in so doing presumes to be standing at his grave. (Euripides, 14) But because the object of the declamation ‘this’—man, in this case—continues to unfold, counting it ‘as that’ is bound to be challenged by the emergence of further perceptive data incongruent with the identity assigned to it. The declared completeness of the unity of meaning of the still-unfolding doings of the other cannot but be short-lived precisely because the unfolding of such doings is bound to conflict with the substance of the kerygmatic identification. The incongruence of new perceptive data—which, as Herculitus’ eiver, flows and flows—with the completed unity of meaning assigned to it negates the fitness of the meaningful totalities of meaning making them inescapably ephemeral.

The need to make sense of the new perceptive data means that the process of synthesis must be undertaken anew so as to accommodate the emerging information. Just like the calling into question of the identity kerygmatically assigned, this process is insurmountable. It is ‘by nature that all men desire to know’ and it is by natural necessity that all men are compelled to make sense of the as-of-yet senseless. The new ‘this’ demands the construction of a new ‘that’. The predisposition to know, the one to which Aristotle alludes and which is naturalized in Kant’s first *Critique*, compels Levinas’ subject to totalize, ontologize and kerygmatically identify. The dynamic relation between the meaningless and the meaningful is bridged by the epistemic compulsion to synthesize and this natural cognitive proclivity is guided in its action by the epistemic pressure posed by the unaccounted other who refuses the identity assigned to him—“the other present himself, exceeding *the idea of the other in me.*” (TI, 50)— but who, importantly,

also refuses ignominy. The sensible surfeit that subverts the idea of the other also challenges the categorical might of persistent unity as a metaphysical category. In fact, the subversive appearance of the Other not only amounts to the negation of the particular assignment of unified meaning and the imposition of identity but also—and more profoundly—challenges the metaphysical primordially of ontological unity showing it for what it actually is, a metaphysical prejudices. In challenging the principle of individual identity and, with it, the primordially of these ontological categories, this act of metaphysical subversion halts their systematic application:

We call this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other ethics. The strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possession, is precisely accomplished as a calling into question of my spontaneity, as ethics.(TI, 43)

This foundational pre-rational form of epistemological action-guidance is what Levinas calls ethics. The ethical dimension of this interruption consists in the tacit prescription of the epistemic task by constraining the way in which the subject is allowed to constitute and deploy meaning. The customary way by which the world has been articulated up until the very moment of this epistemic rebellion is made to stop and the imposition of the identity is made to halt as well.

In its constitutive guise, however, ethics does not concern alternative choices with varying degrees of moral valence—as the pious readers would so much like to have. The other imposes itself in a tacit demand to which the subject acquiesces before understanding it. Just as someone calling our name from some point beyond our field of

vision, the other commands attention without granting the choice not to pay heed. This form of normativity dispenses with the need of justification by being the expression of the radical facticity of the limit of possibility. It is precisely this pre-cognitive imposition, which, as Ethics but more appropriately as *ethos*, is more primordial than Ontology.

The positive side of the negation imposed by the pre-ontological apparition of the unthematized surplus of perceptive data is the refusal of total negation. Because negation is an intentional act, it can only occur in the wake of a cognitive operation where the objectifying intentional act has been completed: one negates *a* something. In other words, for there to be negation there must be something to negate and to the extent that the Other is present before cognition, negation is possible only once the other has been constituted into a meaningful unity. This Levinasian position replicates Heidegger's claim that "Even *Dasein's* Being-alone is Being-with in the world. The Other can be missing only in and for Being-with". (Heidegger, 157)

Negation is already underpinned by the primordially of the *ethical*—the pre-reflectively normative—mechanism in which the disperse sensible data is thrust into perception. Negation presupposes *being's* meaning as unity and as such being is always the cognitive product of the schematism by which sensible dispersion is resolved in a mereological unit. Any act of negation expresses "the impossibility of "total negation" because it is impossible "to renounce comprehension absolutely" without in the same stroke renouncing negation. (TI 198) Total negation would be a performative contradiction.

For this reason the constitutive injunction against negation is not only the limit for the subject's autonomy but is also the limit to his passivity. The injunction against the deployment of the customary categories of being is a new call to thematization and a revindication of totalization, though not of its substantive content. In fact, the insurmountable impossibility to negate completely amounts to the reaffirmation of the subject's inescapable totalizing nature, which rather than being rejected and condemned, may be understood—just as in Heidegger's ontological analysis—as the positive principle of subjective individuation: the subject is a thematizing agent. But this thematization is always peremptory, merely a sketch, which though imperfect is sufficient and though sufficient never final.

Conclusion

Despite Levinas' protestation, Heidegger does not take ontology to be fundamental anymore than Levinas himself takes ethics to be about choice and autonomous deliberative reason. In this sense, both projects are concerned with the deconstruction of their respective themes. Levinas is an ethical revisionist as Heidegger is an ontological one. In both models, ontological thematization has explanatory priority though not efficient priority. Levinas speaks about the other from the space of thematization—as Derrida points out in *Violence and Metaphysics*—as Heidegger speaks about the ontic from the space of the ontological. This in the end is just the nature of the beast. So it is this explanatory priority as constitutive of *being's* meaning and not a primordial metaphysical category what Heidegger calls fundamental ontology.

However, there is an important difference that ought to be pointed out. Whereas Heidegger has a certain normative claim to the importance of voluntary and self-determining thought, Levinas metaphysical account of ethics commits him to an undifferentiated cognitive landscape in which all totalization is created equal. No totality is better than other and this means, for instance, that a neurobiological account of human psychology and motivation is just as good—or as deficient, to be fair—as a religious one. This is certainly not the case for Heidegger for whom orders of articulation vary in quality and explanatory merit. *Ceteris paribus*, we must recognize that neurobiology has had better explanatory and predictive power in matters of—say psychopathologies—than the study of demonic possessions. This ontological hierarchy gives the Heideggerian project the possibility of rejecting certain collective claims and socio-political practices in terms of their analytic aptitude while Levinas' metaphysics cannot. In Levinas, ultimately, all acts are subservient to *ethics*—laudable or despicable—and all that is said is just said. All concocted totalities stand at an equal distance of the Other.

Perhaps the most profound theoretical difference between the two positions is the idea of autonomy, which for Heidegger consists in the positive though perfunctory moment of liberation from collective conceptual and thus preformative binds while for Levinas it is the mode of Pantagruelic enjoyment in which everything is at the mercy of the subject's ontological presuppositions. This, in any case, is not an irreconcilable difference and, indeed, Heidegger recognizes the appeal of the ontic form of freedom from the encumbrance of analyticity.

Dasein presents to itself the possibility of losing itself in
the *people* and falling into groundlessness... *Dasein*

prepares for itself a constant temptation towards falling.
Being-in-the-world is in itself temptation. (Heidegger, 221)

The ontological is rather the method of modification of the ontic and in fact, while the ontic constitutes the object of the ontological, the ontological in turn will return to redefine the ontic. The interplay of these two registers of thematization is dynamic and constant and mutually constitutive. This relation of dynamic and constant mutual configuration of the reflective and the pre-reflective is also essential to Levinas' metaphysics where totalization and the *said* result form the epistemic task imposed by the Other but are also the object of the Other's disruption. In their inconspicuous application rests the conditions of possibility for interruption by the Other and the *saying* as well as the consequent call to further schematisation. Discussing the specific manner in which this dynamic interplay takes place will, however, have to be left for another time.

There is one final remark to be made. It seems of critical importance not to turn either of these two models into soteriological projects just as it is essential—despite whatever our moral and political inclinations may be—to resist the temptation of reading Levinas against Heidegger. To take Levinas notion of ethics as the antithesis of Heidegger's ontology is to show a serious misunderstanding of Heidegger's idea of *authenticity* while, at the very same time but much more problematically, to implicitly impute a category of authenticity to Levinas.

The fulfillment of the epistemological vocation of either subject is not the achievement of salvation or sainthood but simply the temporary modification—always provisional—by way of the phenomenological analysis of the categories of being that the

subject deploys unreflectively. Just as Levinas' *said* is always interrupted by *saying* which will eventually be accounted again as *said*, Heidegger's *Dasein* is always ready to abandon ontological analyticity to return to the ontic and so on. In Heidegger's own words:

Proper Being-One's-Self does not rest upon an exceptional condition of the subject, a condition that has been detached from *people*; it is rather an existentiell modification of *people*—of *people* as an essential existentielle. (Heidegger, 168 with my modification)

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