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Translating "Hebrew" into "Greek": the discursive hermeneutics of Emmanuel Levinas's Talmudic readings

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TRANSLATING “HEBREW” INTO “GREEK”:
THE DISCURSIVE HERMENEUTICS OF
EMMANUEL LEVINAS’S TALMUDIC READINGS

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Interdepartmental Program in Comparative Literature

by
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Many people have contributed to my accomplishments, but the one
who deserves special mention most of all is my wife, Kristina,
whose encouragement, faith, and support
keep me going.

Table of Contents

DEDICATION	ii
ABSTRACT	v
CHAPTER ONE. INTRODUCTION: ENTERING THE TEXT	1
Discourse in Levinas: The Reading of Structures	1
Levinas, “Greek,” and the Talmud: The Structure of Reading	7
Brief Abstract of Levinas’s Philosophical Project	21
CHAPTER TWO. SUBJECTIVITY AND THE SINS OF READING	30
“Who is One-Self?”	30
Phenomenology as Radical Philosophy	32
Phenomenology as Radical Method	36
Intentionality and the Significance of Being	38
<i>Dasein</i> and the Structure of Being	43
Heidegger and the Power of Being	50
CHAPTER THREE. READING: THE POSSIBILITY OF THE OTHER	61
Phenomenology and the Possibility of the Other	61
Ethics and the Structures of Transcendence	66
Being-for-the-Other	69
Salvation, Sorcery, and the Western Subject	74
Temptation and Opposition	82
CHAPTER FOUR. INFINITY: BEYOND BEING, BEYOND THE TEXT	88
The Challenge of an Ontological Reversal	88
Descartes and the Infinite	90
Infinity and the Surplus of Meaning	94
The Oedipal Blindness of Philosophy	101
Reading the Infinite in the Talmud: The Form of Transcendence	106
Reading God in the Talmud: The Content of Transcendence	121
CHAPTER FIVE. ETHICS AND READING: BEFORE BEING, BEFORE THE TEXT	131
The Risk of Subjectivity	131
A Tradition of Renewal and Anti-Idolatry	134
The Subject of the Book	140
Ethics and Revelation: The Responsible Reader	142
Separation and Transcendence: The Redemption of Language	147
Reason and Vigilance: Reading Ethics as “For-the-Other”	150

CHAPTER SIX. CONCLUSION: HOLY HISTORY AND MESSIANIC POLITICS	158
“To the Extent that Messianic Times Are Often Designated as the Epoch of Conclusions”..	158
The Temptation of Revolution: The Future of the State	159
Messianic Discourse and Holy History	162
BIBLIOGRAPHY	165
VITA	176

Abstract

This dissertation examines Emmanuel Levinas's Talmudic readings and the hermeneutics employed to translate the Talmud into modern language. Levinas claims to be translating "Hebrew" into "Greek" by rendering into a universal, philosophical language ("Greek") the ethical structure of subjectivity ("Hebrew") within the Talmud. Since they investigate the structure of subjectivity, extensive use of his philosophical works and the influential works of others are used to analyze his Talmudic readings.

Chapter One places Levinas's project against the background of the Talmud, Judaic tradition, and projects like Rudolf Bultmann's New Testament readings and Thorleif Boman's comparative study of Greek and Hebrew. A brief abstract of Levinas's philosophy emphasizing his understanding of the hermeneutics of subjectivity is given. Chapters Two and Three examine Husserl and Heidegger's formative influences, especially their hermeneutics of everyday experience, wherein Levinas locates the essential flaw of Western philosophy, which begins with an already constituted subjectivity. Although all three view the structure of hermeneutics as essentially discursive, Levinas insists that the subject is not the source for these discursive structures, or even for its own subjectivity. Rather, that source, where any philosophical understanding must start, is the Other. Levinas sees exhortations against things like "sorcery" and "temptation" as the Talmud's mode of resisting and restraining subjectivity's natural tendency to seek out its own freedom and power. Western philosophy, however, actually tends to either start from this condition or work toward it. Chapter Four discusses the idea of infinity according to Levinas and Descartes, and its role in founding consciousness. In this respect, infinity coincides with the idea of God. Chapter five looks at ethics and its relation to the structure of subjectivity. Levinas reads the Talmud in light of the

ethical situation confronting the subject in the encounter with the Other. The Other actually establishes subjectivity and its discursive hermeneutical structures, so subjectivity begins and continues as an ethical response. The Conclusion looks at the idea of “messianic politics,” showing how Levinas describes the structure of subjectivity as a unique “chosenness,” revealing its discursive hermeneutical structures to be orientating the subject to future ethical responses.

Chapter One

Introduction: Entering the Text

Discourse in Levinas: The Reading of Structure

The work of Emmanuel Levinas is a work of internalized struggles. From the beginning, he is a phenomenologist operating ceaselessly to overcome the limits of that philosophical science. And, in surmounting the ontologies of Husserl and Heidegger, Levinas's thought still bears the traces of their influence. Furthermore, he is at all times a Jewish thinker indebted to Martin Heidegger yet repulsed by his Nazi affiliations. He is also a Western philosopher who comes to dispute the traditional stance and methodology of Western philosophy. As Jacques Derrida points out in his essay "Violence and Metaphysics," Levinas's works attempt to overcome the violence of metaphysics, but cannot escape the language of metaphysics to achieve this task. It must speak "Greek," a metonym for the West, to overcome the violence done by its own "Greek," or philosophical, language, and it is therefore a *logomachy* that can "only *do itself violence*" ("Violence" 130). Many see Levinas's *Otherwise than Being* as a response to Derrida's critique, and within that work a turn to more singular and unabashedly religious terminology as an internalization of those insights of Derrida into his philosophical project.

Even within his writing, Levinas admits that there are specters haunting it, as within his first book, Théorie de l'intuition dans la phénoménologie de Husserl, where he admits that within the exposition of Husserl's phenomenology the influence of Heidegger is to be often felt (xxxiii). Years later, in Totalité et infini, Levinas claims that Franz Rosenzweig's Stern der Erlösung is "a work too often present in this book to be cited" (Totality 28). Throughout his essays on Judaism and his

commentaries on the Talmud, Levinas speaks of Mordechai Chouchani, his “prestigious– and merciless– teacher of exegesis and of Talmud” (“Signature” 291). Little is known about Chouchani beyond the brief mention of his name whenever Levinas discusses certain approaches proper to Talmudic tradition. Although these admitted traces of encounters in his works are not struggles *per se*, they are in a sense recurring discourses with these influences, and thus speak to the overall concern with “discourse” that seems to define Levinas’s entire body of work, from his philosophical writings, to his wide range of essays, and even to his Talmudic readings.

The Talmudic readings speak especially to this notion of continual discourse in Levinas’s works for several reasons. First, they embody for Levinas the true essence of Judaism, that is, the obligatory encounter with the Other, which as we will see makes demands on the subject within this encounter in the form of discourse. Second, through their relation to Judaic tradition and thought, they contribute to a fuller understanding of Levinas’s Judaic influences within his own works. Third, they are translations, and as such speak to the problematics of language and discourse to an Other. Finally, they are Levinas’s attempts, as he states it, to translate “Hebrew” into “Greek,” or distinct elements of Judaism into clear, distinct, and universal concepts. “Hebrew” here comes to stand for the particulars of the encounter with the Other, and “Greek” the universals which can in a sense be “extracted” from these particulars.

Levinas’s desire in the Talmudic readings to “translate” Hebrew into Greek has been understood by many to mean “translating Jewish thought into the language of modern times,” as Annette Aronowicz says in her introduction to her volume Nine Talmudic Readings (ix). To say that Levinas simply brings upon modernity, the Western experience Levinas gives as “Greek,” fragments of Talmudic wisdom would be to deny the very possibilities he constructs by consciously speaking

within the tension between Hebrew and Greek. In the preface to the Italian translation of his collection of Talmudic readings L’Au-delà du verset, Levinas is explicit in his intentions regarding the hermeneutics of his Talmudic translations. Far from belonging “to the literature of religious archeology or the saga of a private or marginal history,” these Talmudic readings are extensions of his work, for as Levinas says,

my work, which is situated in the fullness of the documents, beliefs and moral practices that characterize the positive fact of Judaism— in its empirical and historical content, which is constantly enriched and renewed by the ongoing contributions of the religious experience, lived, yet unpredictable; bearing exegetic traits, but new— attempts to return to the structures or modalities of a spiritual that lends itself to, or consents to, or even tends toward, such treatment. These structures or modalities are hidden beneath consciousness, which is representative or conceptual, already invested in the world, and hence absorbed in it. They are hidden, but can be discerned by a phenomenology attentive to the horizons of consciousness, and in this sense (despite its use of biblical and Talmudic documents and formulations) it is a phenomenology prior to a theology. (“From Ethics to Exegesis” 109)

Levinas here states that the real purpose of his work is to capture the distinct structures “hidden beneath consciousness,” revealing that his phenomenological roots still sustain his work, even within the Talmudic readings, despite their being given in a manner wholly observant of Jewish exegetical traditions. These structures, however, must be captured within a particular instance, and not within a generalized or theorized manner; that is, to speak in a more phenomenological manner, the structural essence of consciousness must be captured in existence.

Levinas writes in his explication of Husserl’s Ideen that “it is in the very nature of essence to require examples in order to be grasped” (“On *Ideas*” 6). Essence or *eidos* here is defined as that “something” which “remains invariable, identical, the necessary basis of the variation itself . . . it has infinite extensions within ‘possibles’” (5). Apprehension of essences is given through intuition, the way in which consciousness encounters its world, a concept which will be explained further in the

short discussion of Levinas's philosophy. It is of concern here to the understanding of eidetic truths and individual truths, for individual truths can be "envisaged as singularizations or individuations of specified essences" (7). As individuations of essences, these facts "are determined by the eidetic truths of their respective regions," regions being essences of a higher generality. The study of the essences of these regions is termed by Husserl to be regional eidetics or regional ontologies. An elementary understanding of the centrality of "regional ontology" to phenomenology is the first step to understanding many philosophers who were influenced by Husserl, from the earliest structuralists like Roman Jakobson, to phenomenologists like Merleau-Ponty to Sartre to Levinas, and especially Heidegger. The modalities of Dasein as "being-in-the-world" ("*in-der-Welt-sein*") and "being-with," ("*Mitsein*"), or even his discussion of things as "ready-to-hand" ("*zuhanden*") or "present-at-hand" ("*vorhanden*"), reflect the influence of Husserl's regional ontologies, though Heidegger comes to reject the "eidetic" nature of Husserl's phenomenology.

This is not to say that Levinas's concern with the Talmud is a concern with religion as a regional ontology. His concern, again, is with the structures "hidden beneath consciousness," so he must turn to the foundation of consciousness, the inaugural encounter with the other. Levinas comes to define this event of the other, that origin of consciousness which will not allow itself to be constituted fully within consciousness, as the "prephilosophical experience" ("On Jewish Philosophy" 175). As will be shown, this encounter is also the foundation of religion and of language, the structures of which cannot be given without the consciousness perceiving them, for Husserl has shown that consciousness is always a consciousness "of" something. Thus, it cannot be extracted from the regions in which it becomes manifest— to do so would be to make of it an abstract, disengaged entity. Levinas's Talmudic readings are a way of engaging the region wherein

consciousness reveals most clearly the traces of the encounter with the other, and as such are but an extension of Levinas's purpose within his entire work. Bringing his investigations from his philosophical texts to his religious ones does not seem to Levinas to transgress or confuse distinct areas of thought and experience. He refuses to "make a radical distinction between the philosophical implicit and prephilosophical experience ("On Jewish Philosophy" 175).

At this primal level of existence, consciousness, even when it engages only itself within the acts of reflection and understanding, is discourse, for as Levinas repeatedly remarks, each instance of a phenomenon is already a discourse ("Substitution" 85; "Language and Proximity" 112). The present discussion on Levinas's Talmudic readings aims at revealing that this "prephilosophical" structure, understood to be essentially the structure of discourse, as his philosophical works have tried to explain, is the basis for the hermeneutics employed in the Talmudic readings, determining how the specific tractates focused upon are read, and how they are interpreted into a "modern" language, to use Levinas's term. Even further, this discursive structure illustrates that the primary mode of transcendence for subjectivity is not founded on knowledge, or even the understanding of being, but upon ethics, initiated by that primary encounter with the other. Regarding his work Totality and Infinity, Levinas claims that "it presents itself as a defense of subjectivity," grasping it not at the "purely egoist" level, "but as founded in the idea of infinity" (Totality 26). This discussion hopes to show that the same can be said for Levinas's Talmudic readings, which feature structures of criticism and opposition to the "purely egoist" mode of subjectivity paralleling those found in his philosophical works (26).

Levinas does not share the same intellectual fastidiousness about the philosophical and religious upon which many modern thinkers pride themselves. Although he sees that, in a way,

“religions have lost their guiding role in modern consciousness,” religion, the relation to the infinite, is the source for philosophy (“Damages Due to Fire” 182). That the encounter with the infinite serves to found philosophy is easily seen in the adherence to the structures of reason which philosophy clings to for security and knowledge—reason as the attempt, as will be made clear, to constitute as present that which is absent, for as Levinas says, “religion . . . is the ultimate structure” (Totality 80). Here religion is seen as referring to the original structure of transcendence, that term not limited to, but admittedly indicating, that simple act of understanding employed by a subject to grasp what is exterior to it. In addition, Levinas writes that philosophy “is called into being by a religion adrift,” adding that for the most part, “religion is always adrift” (182). He as much as admits that philosophy does not stay localized; he refuses to see the “radical difference” made “between philosophy and simple thought, as though all philosophies did not derive from non-philosophic sources” (“The Youth of Israel” 122). It is that simple thought within the Talmud, Levinas shows, that carries infinite meanings. Philosophy, like religion, is also able to trace things back to their origin, though the latter will encapsulate the idea of those things within parables and myths. Like philosophy, religion, particularly Judaism, can “put itself in question, in penetrating beneath its own condition” (Totality 85).

Getting beneath that condition is the goal for Levinas’s work, looking through a phenomenologically guided critique at everyday experience, as well as at Israel itself, given through “its Scriptures and their interpretations,” which for Levinas “constitute a *figure* in which a primordial mode of the human is revealed” (“From Ethics to Exegesis” 110). This mode or “irreducible structure” is revealed to be the first instance of structure, and as such it is the structure “upon which all the other structures rest” (Totality 79). This structure more formally is simply “the idea of

Infinity,” again, the very idea which initiates transcendence for the subject (79). Levinas looks to the phenomenological method to “open up” experience itself, “allowing reality to appear in its ultimate structure” (“Reflections on Phenomenological ‘Technique’” 92). Accordingly, the Talmud, through its discursive practice of interlocution to discover rather than establish meaning, allows for the architecture of consciousness to reveal itself as it is, either as totalization or as the embrace of the ethical.

Levinas, “Greek,” and the Talmud: The Structure of Reading

The Talmud, therefore, operates through a sort of contextualization, much like consciousness itself, for as Husserl shows, consciousness is always contingent, always a “consciousness *of*” something within its world. This structure, “a-consciousness-*of*,” is the one that Descartes could not evade, even after withdrawing from his world wholly. Furthermore, understanding functions only within a schema that is contextualized, that is, within a “text” that bears signs already familiar to the subject. Ideas signify other ideas, much as words are understood only within reference to other words. For truth to be revealed, then, proper context must be allowed; for this reason, “the Talmud is often interested much more in the category than in the event itself about which it speaks” (“Messianic Texts” 65). It focuses on revealing those structures or modalities existing within consciousness (“From Ethics to Exegesis” 109). But, as Levinas points out, revelation only occurs where it is welcomed, where meaning is allowed to exist within its own identity, and not as an instance of the Same. Proper “context,” or proper “clearing,” to borrow a Heideggerian notion, must be given freely for revelation to occur. Phenomenology echoes the Talmud in asserting that the only proper context for consciousness is existence itself. Outside of existence, consciousness is only

alienated from its foundation and thus flattened, abstracted, and counterfeit. Levinas says that the Talmud can expose its meaning “only if one approaches [it] from the angle of a concrete problem or social situation” (“Messianic Texts” 68). Only by beginning with real facts and problems can the meaning within the Talmud be seen. Thus, if the Talmud cannot be considered philosophical, for Levinas, “its tractates are an eminent source of those experiences from which philosophies derive their nourishment” (Nine Talmudic Readings 4). Again, those experiences can only be obtained in their truth within the context that calls them into existence, which explains why Levinas can say that philosophy “presents itself in the Talmud in the guise of moral tales and adages” (4).

This penchant of Levinas for exhibiting the philosophical or “prephilosophical” within the Talmud should not indicate that he never attempts to interpret the more pious meanings of those texts. In fact, he states that in these Talmudic readings he does not “wish to exclude” from his readings “the religious meaning that guides the reading of the mystic or naive believer, nor the meaning that a theologian would extract” (“Messianic Texts” 68). Levinas does assert, however, that these readings all center on the idea that these religious meanings are “not only transposable into a philosophical language,” but also direct the reader of these texts to “philosophical problems” (68). He adds, “the thought of the Doctors of the Talmud proceeds from a meditation that is radical enough to satisfy the demands of philosophy. It is this rational meaning which has been the object of our research” (68).

The notion of a “rational meaning” within the Talmud brings up the first reason for Levinas’s attempt to translate the “Hebrew” of the Talmud into “Greek,” that reason being the clarity and universality which characterize “Greek” thought and language. To Levinas, the “base of civilization” is the “Reason that the Greek philosophers revealed to the world” (“The Spinoza Case” 109). The

“logic of the Greeks” founded the possibility for “harmony between men,” but only conditionally: “our interlocutor must agree to speak, and be brought into discourse” (“Monotheism and Language” 178). “I am convinced,” Levinas has written,

that we must have recourse to the medium of full understanding and comprehension, in which all truth is reflected— that is, to the Greek civilization and what it engendered, *logos*, the coherent discourse of reason. (“Israel and Universalism” 176)

This analysis of what the West inherited from the Greeks shows that Levinas sees within that inheritance the capacity for justice, for reorienting subjectivity away from transcendence as pure knowledge and toward transcendence as an ethical command from the other. Greek clarity provides for universality among those seeking the security and coherence of reason; or, as Levinas says, “a truth is universal when it applies to every reasonable being” (“A Religion for Adults” 21). The Talmud, on the other hand, speaks to the ethical event founding the very possibility of reason and of reasonable beings. Levinas writes that “a religion is universal when it is open to all. In this sense, the Judaism that links the Divine to the moral has always aspired to be universal” (21). Within the Talmud, Levinas contends, the urgency of Talmudic ethics brings forth this universality, for the Talmud allows one to penetrate through the contexts and contingencies that enable being to be brought forth out of nothingness, and capture the underlying structure, the universal structure, common to every instance of being. Such universalism “has greater weight” than the letter containing it, waiting “like an explosive, within the letter,” ready to “burst the letter apart” (“Toward the Other” 28).

One of Levinas’s Talmudic readings, “La traduction de l’Écriture,” or “the Translation of the Scriptures,” deals primarily with the idea of translating the scriptures into Greek. The Mishna, or the central part of the Talmudic text or tractate featuring rabbinical discussion of the Torah, mentions

after its own brief that the masters have only authorized the translation of the Scriptures into Greek (“The Translation of the Scriptures” 33; “La traduction de l’Écriture” 43). The accompanying Gemara, the commentary added to the Mishna so as to “complete” it and often written down beside it along its margins, takes the discussion even further, concentrating on the full implications of the words of the Mishna. These parts of the tractates usually precede the interpretation of Levinas, prefacing his own thoughts, which of course lends itself most easily to understanding that which he is interpreting, but also indicates the Judaic tradition of humility and reverence before the words of the Talmudic sages. The question, Levinas points out, is whether or not such a translation profanes the Scriptures, whether such a translation loses the “religious qualities” within it, that “spiritual quality” inherent to its original language (“Translation” 36). Would the translation not “introduce . . . the echoes of foreign worlds?”, asks Levinas (36). The Mishna espouses a “judaïsme traduisible,” accessible to the language of all nations (“Le traduction” 51). Levinas’s interpretation points out that the command to translate the Scriptures keeps to the essential purpose of the Talmud, to allow the holy works to live by its dispersion among a “multiplicity of persons” (“Translation” 43). Such a translation also keeps to the nature of the Talmud, which is that it “finds dogma distasteful” (43). For Levinas, “the books retain their meaning in all languages,” and to forbid any transmission to other peoples, other tongues, is to make of Judaism a cult (44). There is the “unalterable Judaism of the cult,” he adds, and that Judaism “open to modernity” (44).

This, then, introduces the second reason for Levinas’s desire to translate the “Hebrew” of the Talmud into “Greek,” for we in the modern world are all now in a sense “Greek,” in that ours is a world of science, theories, objective knowledge, and, most of all, philosophy, all of which bear the trace of Greek origins. Again and again, Levinas asserts that “everything has been thought” within

that small world of the ancient Mediterranean, encompassing Greek knowledge and Judaic wisdom (Quatre lectures talmudiques 16). However, modernity has favored the former over the latter, and the allegiance to the latter has been misinterpreted by many as the separation from modernity. Levinas's Talmudic lectures aim at correcting those things. Thus, Levinas sees the translation of the Scriptures into Greek as a way "for us Jews to claim our modernity alongside our antiquity older than all antiquity" ("Translation" 51). But again, Greek for Levinas is "an intelligibility open to the unbiased mind" (51). It has the "indisputable contribution of clarity" giving a unique "privilege" to the Greek language (53). "Greek is prose, the prose of commentary, of hermeneutics" says Levinas, "a hermeneutic interpretation that often uses metaphors, but also the language that 'demetaphorizes' metaphors, conceptualizes them, even if it must always begin anew" (53). Greek has the "order, clarity, method, [and] desire to move from the simple to the complex" (53). Elsewhere, Levinas has called Greek a "langue transparente," one that expresses all in this world that is human, and

une certaine façon pour les mots de s'assembler, de s'ordonner en discours qui questionne affirmant, qui affirme niant; façon qui, sous les vocables divers des nations, a été destinée, à travers continents, à devenir discours universitaire, discours universel; tours et détours des signes qui montrent et démontrent.

("Le traduction" 10)

Even more, Greek has the capacity to break "idoles et tyrannies" (10). Greek, therefore, has the advantage of allowing the Torah and the Talmud to continue its life in the modern world outside of being artifact or anachronism. In fact, the "translation" allows for the "extension of Holy History universally" (In the Time of the Nations 3). This is a seemingly simple idea with complex implications, as will be shown in the final chapter of this discussion, for "holiness" in much of Levinas's works indicates a separateness, an evasion of comprehension. The continuation of Holy history here means that the ethical situation conveyed throughout the Talmud allows for one to

remain outside history, or at least remain attached to it only partially, to be “beyond the State,” like the indifference shown by the group of Talmudic scholars toward Alexander the Great and his interrogation of their wisdom, seen in the Talmudic reading “Au-delà de l’Etat dans l’Etat.”

Levinas is not alone in his assessment of the qualities belonging to the Greek language. Some have gone so far as to note similarities which provoke a thesis that one founds the other; usually scholars point to Hebrew as foundational, but Joseph Yahuda argues just the opposite, that Hebrew comes from Greek. Both schools of thought point to things like the alphabet of each, the “alpha” [Α] and “beta” [Β] corresponding strikingly to the first two letters of the Hebrew alphabet, [א] “aleph” and [ב] “beit.” Yet, Yahuda does point out that “Jewish scholars have learned Greek in order to gain direct access to the Septuagint and the works of Josephus, and the better to understand the Talmud” (Yahuda 6). The most compelling analysis of the comparative qualities and distinctions between the two languages has come from Thorlief Boman, whose work Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek establishes the two as representative of two different approaches to existence. He echoes the judgments Levinas makes about Greek, but he also illustrates those features of Hebrew that Levinas struggles to make use of and “translate” into Greek. Boman reminds us that Hebrew has been determined to be “dynamic,” while Greek is “static” (Boman 19). He elaborates by saying that Hebrew is obviously “dynamic, vigorous, passionate, and sometimes quite explosive in kind,” while Greek is “static, peaceful, moderate, and harmonious in kind” (27). But this distinction elicits a negative response usually, especially if one is held to be the ideal while the other the more negative “foil” for those ideal qualities. Instead, the two are peers, each grasping a different aspect to reality (27). For example, Hebrew contains many more stative verbs, ones that “designate a condition (status) which is not fixed and dead but in flux” (33). The verb “to stand,” for instance, always

designates not the condition of standing, but the completion or cessation of activity. Thus, to be standing means the rising up from a chair, or the completion of activity, or even the anticipation of movement. To use one of Boman's examples, for the Greek, trees standing in a field makes sense, but for the Hebrew, this is "absurd and non-existent" because trees do not have any activity that comes toward or away from the status of standing (29). Thus, "motionless and fixed being" does not hold true for the Hebrew, but it is the beginning of perception for the Greek. The common distinction between being and becoming holds meaning for those who think as the Greeks did, but for the Hebrew, such a distinction is "irrelevant," because the two were always "experienced by them as a unity" (33). Form and matter for the Hebrew unite in appearance or existence, so the two are never separated as they are for the Greek, seen in the "ideal" Platonic forms of Greek philosophy.

Another distinction that Boman suggests as relevant to understanding the Hebrew and Greek minds is that between psychological and logical, the former representing the Hebrew. Often mistakenly assumed to be "primitive" or "pre-logical," the Hebrew asks not what is objectively true, but "what is subjectively certain, what is faithful in the existential sense" (202). The Greeks express things universally, as Levinas has noted, lending itself to the great achievements in philosophy, science, and mathematics. Hebrew "achieved most in the field of religion and morals," says Boman (202). Yet, both express "truths" as they experience it. "In a simple and unadorned language," says Boman, "the Hebrew writers have given expression to profound and meaningful truths," underscoring what Levinas suggests is the real strength of the Talmud, its ability to express the truths of life as it is lived in the concrete. As will be shown, this is the same praise given to phenomenology, the philosophical and "scientific" approach to understanding our existence by going back to the things themselves. But, to return to the dichotomy of Greek and Hebrew, the Hebrew asks "not what is

in agreement with impersonal, objective being,” as the Greek does; instead, he asks “what is in agreement with the facts that are meaningful” for himself (202). The Hebrew, therefore, is “directed toward events, living, and history” (202). As Levinas has noted, Judaism itself operates on “an irreducible modality of being present to the world” (“Desacralization and Disenchantment” 153). More fully, the Talmud directs understanding toward the concrete contingencies of existence, rather than the concepts and abstract thought that are created from those contingencies, as with the Greeks. The Talmud also shows what Boman says of the Hebrew, who “separates the non-essential and external from the essential and important in order to find the heart of the matter, and in order, once having found it, to express it as briefly and as pointedly as possible” (Boman 203). “Once the point has been discovered,” he adds, “there is no purpose in setting forth a detailed demonstration with an extensive development of ideas” (203). To illustrate his ideas, Boman gives the comparison between Socrates and an Orthodox Jew. Socrates, once “seized by a problem,” remains “immobile,” fixed in contemplation, while the Jew “moves his whole body ceaselessly in deep devotion and adoration” (205). “Rest, harmony, composure, and self-control– this is the Greek way; movement, life, deep emotion, and power– this is the Hebrew way” (205). However, the two ways complement each other’s approach, for the Greeks “describe reality as *being*,” while the Hebrews describe it as “*movement*” (208). “Reality,” notes Boman, is “both at the same time; this is logically impossible, and yet it is correct” (208).

Supplementing this idea of Hebrew as a language oriented toward the dynamic, Levinas continually praises the more discursive qualities of the Talmud. The Talmud is given to men “who are on earth and who must act here below,” and so is “entrusted to human discussion” (“Desacralization and Disenchantment” 154). Like the Scriptures themselves, the Talmud demands

interpretation, always awaiting “a hermeneutic” (“On the Jewish Reading of Scriptures” 115; “For a place in the Bible” 21). The Talmud, as has been indicated, is actually a commentary on commentary, containing both the initial Mishna and the Gemara which completes it, the Gemara usually printed around the borders of the Mishna. Levinas has said of the relationship between the two elements that the Mishna gains its fuller sense only by having the Gemara “amplify” things “by the new questions its own questions will raise and by the non-spoken meanings that will appear in the meaning it expresses” (“Desacralization” 142). Thus, entering the text is to enter *in medias res*, right in the middle of a discussion that began before the Talmud was opened, and will continue anew every time that it is opened thereafter. Levinas says of the Babylonian Talmudists, who wrote down their argumentations for the Babylonian Talmud upon which Levinas relies for his texts, that these men were “used to discussion,” and so “attacked, asked questions, and put their masters and their interlocutors on the spot” (“As Old as the World?” 86). The Talmud does not put forth the Law without arbitration, and neither does the reader have the only valid interpretation. As Levinas says, “there is always a second opinion in the Talmud,” so it is “content to emphasize the ambiguity” of the problem or verse at hand (“Messianic Texts” 67, 65). In fact, Levinas refers to the Min, the “technical” term for the Sadducee, that “Israelite who keeps only to the letter of the texts, and refuses rabbinic exegesis” (“As Old as the World?” 81). The Scriptures necessarily demand such dynamic interpretation, for they “reproduce what was taught yesterday,” but are always “read according to tomorrow” (“Contempt for the Torah as Idolatry” 66).

Commonly referred to as a book of “pots and pans,” the Talmud features living men existing in the form that defines their concrete existence, that of discourse. The second chapter of this study will reveal how this idea of discourse, how the “language” created by consciousness in order to

“read” its world, is the primary model used by phenomenology to illustrate how consciousness interacts with its world and comes to grasp meaning within it. Both phenomenology and the Talmud deal with localities, contingencies, the concrete world of our existence. The Talmud shows how life cannot be “miraculously disengaged from the specificity of local problematics” (In the Time of the Nations viii). God himself “signifies” only through “human *praxis*” in Judaic texts (“Toward the Other” 14).

Regarding the Talmudic readings, Levinas states that “mon effort consiste toujours à dégager de ce langage théologique des significations qui s’adressent à la raison” (“Envers autrui” 33). This goes with his determination to concern himself with the “pensées de sages et non pas de visions prophétiques” (33). Levinas thus is concerned with the wisdom and not the mysticism of the Talmud. In fact, his project to translate “Hebrew” into “Greek” can be said to be an attempt to demystify the Talmud. As Robert Gibbs notes, Levinas praises “Greek’s order, clarity, lack of prejudice, and methodical power, and he terms it the language of demystification, demythifying, depoetizing. It is the prose of commentary and hermeneutics because it demetamorphosizes metaphors” (Gibbs 163; “Translation” 53). This language brings to the discussion the possible relevance of Levinas in the Talmudic readings to Rudolf Bultmann’s *New Testament and Mythology*, wherein he states his attempt to demythologize the New Testament.

Bultmann puts forth his method of demythologizing as a “hermeneutical method,” an answer to the “vital” need for “an existential interpretation” of the New Testament, and further, to Christianity as a whole (Kerygma and Myth 191; 105). For Bultmann, the bible in general, and the New Testament specifically, presupposes the mythical view of the world, and builds its presentation of redemption on the contingencies of this world. But as modern men, we cannot readily adopt this

mythical view without compromising ourselves or sacrificing our intellect; he says “no man can adopt a view of the world by his own volition— it is already determined for him by his place in history” (3). Thus the truths which Christianity is built upon should be reinterpreted within modern, and therefore existentialist terms. Bultmann’s methods and terminology here is very Heideggerian. For example, he states that

at every moment [man] is confronted with an alternative. Either he must immerse himself in the concrete world of nature, and thus inevitably lose his individuality, or he must abandon all security and commit himself unreservedly to the future, and thus alone achieve his authentic Being. Is not that exactly the New Testament understanding of human life? (24-5)

Bultmann readily admits but defends his straightforward appropriation of Heidegger’s thought, saying that those who criticize him for “borrowing Heidegger’s categories and forcing them upon the New Testament,” are in fact “blinding their eyes to the real problem” (25). They should rather be “startled that philosophy is saying the same thing as the New Testament and saying it quite independently” (25).

Before the discussion of the possible similarities between Bultmann’s demythologizing project and Levinas’ purpose in his Talmudic readings, certain things should be made clear. First, given Heidegger’s theological training and admitted admiration for St. Thomas Aquinas, one should not be surprised at the correlations between Heidegger and Christian thought, any more than one should be surprised at the correlation between Heidegger and Husserl, or even Aristotle. Heidegger’s thought bears the trace of all three, that is, phenomenology, Greek philosophy, and Christianity. As for Levinas, it is clear that the “Hebrew” within his works stand right beside the “Greek,” and therefore neither are to be seen as coincidences but as sources of inspiration. He has intensive training and interaction with both the Western tradition and the Judaic traditions. If the Talmud says

the same thing as philosophy, that is because both are given the same voice through Levinas. Next, while Bultmann interprets the New Testament philosophically, Levinas engages the Talmud to show what philosophy not really lacks, but fails to see as its true foundation. The encounter with the other is covered over in its presuppositions concerning subjectivity. Finally, Bultmann can to some degree be criticized for bringing into Christian theology an alien stance, that of a Heideggerian existentialism, yet the same cannot be said of Levinas. His readings of the Talmud as a modern thinker, one who refuses to step out of his identity as a philosopher in the twentieth century, is in fact in line with Judaic tradition, for it brings to life the discourse of the Talmud. It in a sense lives through its hermeneutics, through the way it speaks to all ages, and for Levinas, all peoples. As Annette Aronowicz says, Levinas

claims that the texts *always* need to be translated into secular language, into the language of contemporary issues, into the language that strives to be understood by all, into the language of prose and demystification. The very distance we might feel with respect to these traditional sources is, in a sense, a gain for these very sources, for it allows their universal import to manifest itself in yet another of its aspects.

(Aronowicz x)

As was stated earlier, Levinas never seeks to refuse the religious meanings within the texts he uses for his Talmudic readings. Instead, he seeks to transmit that meaning into philosophical discourse, to translate the “Hebrew” insights into a “Greek” clarity for the universalization of the Laws that the Talmud demands, and for the sake of keeping the Talmud vital and relevant to its very source of inspiration, that of life itself. Thus, like Bultmann to some degree, Levinas wants to demythologize the Talmud not for the sake of scraping off religious sentiment and superstition, but to show that it speaks the language of modern men if they will but listen. Both Bultmann and Levinas agree that there is much to be gained from religious texts, but it is quite evident that Levinas’s

philosophical investigations can be said to parallel his Judaism; one could go so far as to say that his philosophy generates from the structures of existence that are inherent to the Talmud, but beneath the narrow localities of concrete existence. Like phenomenology itself, Levinas seeks in his Talmudic readings to express universally the truths discovered within life as it is lived in the concrete.

Levinas, therefore, eschews the more common forms of academic reading, even criticizing them for the violence that they do to texts. For example, there is the “historical method” that Levinas says alters the “truths that have given life to Judaism,” turning them into mere “incidents and local little histories” (“Messianic Texts” 68). The “*lumières de l’histoire*” cannot be refused, but they are far from being “sufficient for everything” (*Quatre lectures talmudiques* 14). The same criticism is leveled at a scientific “structuralist analysis” (14). Both for Levinas regard their objects only as objects for knowledge, and thus, as abstracted entities, cut off from an approach or context which would give them life and meaning. Instead, Levinas proposes that the Talmudic texts be respected, approached as “sincere,” with something meaningful to say to modern life (“The Youth of Israel” 122). It should be assumed that the “words and representations can be transposed into another language and into other concepts” (122). Rather than as a cultural product, or an oddity from a particular ethnic group, the Talmud should be interpreted according to the rules of its tradition, for only then does the reader of the Talmud assume his responsibilities to the Talmud (“Contempt for the Talmud” 62). Levinas says that he assumes within his readings of the Talmud a permanence of the validity of whatever meanings are contained within the Talmud, and that these meanings are ultimately communicable and relevant. The pages expose an extreme attention to “the real,” but are always in love with “the possible” (*Quatre lectures talmudiques* 13). Levinas intends to bring the texts back to their life of polemic and dialogue, where multiple but never arbitrary meanings rise forth

within every saying (13). Bringing them into modern life allows them to engage and critique that life by the ethical positions they hold forth. Levinas seems anxious to “shock the fanatics for historical method,” as he says it, by maintaining the “idea that inspired thinking is a thought in which everything has been thought, even industrial society and modern technocracy” (“Messianic Texts” 68). Even the simple “transfer of an idea to another climate . . . wrests new possibilities from” that idea, and thus, from the Talmudic texts themselves (“Toward the Other” 21). An example from the Talmudic reading “Desacralization and Disenchantment” illustrates Levinas’s willingness to positively and actively read into even the most archaic or anachronistic elements the Talmud. Listing the numerous punishments resulting in death, such as by stoning, sword, fire, even strangulation, Levinas says that this list does not suggest a fascination with cruelties, but instead shows the necessity of a language which maintains a difference not only between Good and Evil, but also between Evils (“Désacralisation et Désensorcellement” 94). This is set against the more modern viewpoint which would lump things together so as to more readily “understand” them. These things may seem merely the indications of piety and respect on Levinas’s part, but as will be shown, most of these “approaches” parallel the structures of Levinas’s philosophy. Things like the context that the Talmud relies upon, the respect given to “inspired thought,” or even to the notion of messianism, all bear traces of Levinas’s philosophical investigations. The method of this discussion of the Talmudic readings will be to bring forth the elements of his philosophy first, in order to feature the depths and philosophical resonances within the readings of the Talmud. Since only a few aspects of the overall philosophical works can be given at a time, to emphasize their unities and structural integrity, a short introduction to the basics of his philosophy seems necessary.

Brief Abstract of Levinas's Philosophical Project

In the preface to his major work Totality and Infinity, Levinas sets forth the exercise of reason, as it has been conceived and practiced by Western philosophy from the Greeks to our present time, as a war, one waged by the individual thinking subject upon his world in order to subdue it and bring it within his own identity. Reason thus becomes more than a mere activity of structuring the world exterior to the self– it comes to be the primary way the subject relates to his world. Even more, reason appears as the “pure experience of pure being,” establishing an order “from which no one can keep his distance; nothing henceforth is exterior” (TI 21). Here then is the motive behind Levinas's critique of philosophical subjectivity: to distinguish between a consciousness which seeks only itself in its encounter with the world, thus rendering all exteriority as the Same, and a consciousness which is open to its world, and vigilantly keeps this opening upon the world, encountering all alterity it holds forth with a sense of ethical responsibility. The former mode of being that, as Levinas says, “shows itself in war is fixed in the concept of totality,” a totality within which all things, including individuals, “are reduced to being bearers of forces” (21). Thus, within a totality true exteriority can be said to be ‘occluded,’ for a totality essentially shuts out alterity by shutting it within its own identity, absorbing it so that it is no longer exterior. The concept of totality characterizes our primary experience of the world, as John Wild states it in his introduction to the English translation of Totality and Infinity, as “biased and egocentric,” and as such all knowledge of our world follows not from an impartial experience of the world, but from a definitely biased entering into the world as a mere extension of the ego. The subject is always in the world “at home with itself”(12). Cognition is therefore the subject's grasping of being “out of nothing or reducing it to nothing, removing from it its alterity” (44). In place of this alterity, the ego sets up its own meaning,

redefining it essentially by defining it in such a way that it may be perceived. As Levinas's earliest influence, Edmund Husserl, has argued, consciousness proceeds through modes of intentionality to grasp and take hold of objects coming in within its horizon, "intending" the meaning of an object even before encountering it. Intentionality as an elementary mode of consciousness leads to perception, but only insofar as it confers meaning on those objects perceived, for meaning makes perception possible ("Meaning and Sense" 36). In short, meaning precedes perception and makes it possible.

The way in which an ego perceives recalls the modalities of language. In language, "words do not refer to contents which they would designate, but first, laterally, to other words" (36). Like language, experience is not "made up of isolated elements" (37). The things experienced are always understood within context of a reference to other things, which ultimately lead back to the "I" that experiences them and lends to them objective meaning. Here we can trace the circularity that defines totality, grounded within the ego which remains the fundamental referent for that totality. Meaning precedes the data taken in by the subject and "illuminates them," making them perceptible in the end (37). Thus the world exterior to the "I" at the center becomes objectified, quantified, so as to become ultimately "knowable." Yet, within every alteration of meaning, the "I" remains identical: these meanings created represent the "I" to itself, which "thinks" or perceives these alterations, establishing a totality which has as its ultimate referent its self. All of this Husserl showed to be completely necessary for the production of experience; this circuitry of varying "I's" make experience possible through accumulation, bringing with experience the very possibility of knowledge. Through self-consciousness, "we identify ourselves through a multiplicity of temporal phases" ("Substitution" 80). The "I" can recall a past wherein "I tasted this food and liked it," or "I was here before, and I know

the way home.” Thus, the self enclosed within a totality does not move out of its own history, encountering and envisioning nothing beyond its own world, and encounters the world only as recurrence of its very own identity.

As Levinas points out, this building up of a totality depends upon the thematization of the Other, the building of a schema within which the Other is rendered the Same (80). A totality comprehends because everything in it has been apprehended: “everything is here, everything belongs to me” (*Totality* 37). Thus the “I” is at home *with itself*, existing or “dwelling” within its world by *maintaining itself* within a totality. And this dwelling, it must be stated, is a separation of the ego from the world at large, an encompassing or passing over of exteriority according to the will of the “I” to persevere within its own being. When the “I” therefore comes upon exteriority, it recognizes a lack within itself, a recognition that Levinas has termed “hunger.” The ego then moves forward after recognizing any instance of exteriority as unfamiliar, and seeks to render it familiar; that is, it seeks to instill meaning in the other and make the other the Same. All alterity then must be thematized according to the “I” which seeks to perceive this alterity, thereby securing its dwelling within the world. The anxiety over the self’s dwelling within a totality is very important for understanding the relation that the self has with its world, for as Levinas explains, dwelling depends upon “enjoyment,” or “jouissance.” Levinas gives the term “enjoyment” to define the satisfaction the “I” enjoys over the multiple “objects” within its world. As John Wild says, “I take precedence over the various objects I find around me, and . . . I learn to manipulate and control them to my advantage” (*Totality* 12). The “I,” secure within its dwelling, turns alterity into a thematized experience where only itself is encountered. Thus the “I” shuts itself within a totality wherein things become objects at its disposal, and it is free to play with them, understand them, grasp them, live off of them, justify

itself by them— in short, enjoy them, for these objects allow the “I” to be contained securely, with no danger of intrusion from the exterior since it will only encounter things which have been interiorized.

Levinas holds that this concept of totality “dominates Western philosophy” (*Totality* 21). “It is not by chance,” he says, “that the theoretical relation [given as consciousness] has been the preferred schema of the metaphysical relation” (42). Just as egoism defines the way in which we first encounter the world, so too does it define the philosophical approach by which all experience is understood. Consciousness constructs itself through a comprehension of identity given in temporal phases; the “I” of the past bears the same identity as the “I” in both the present and the future, always returning as “the same” for the conscious ego. Similarly, the philosophical subject lays hold of alterity by means of a Being with which that subject identifies itself. This construction of an ontology, like the temporally defined “I” of consciousness, allows exteriority to be grasped “through a third term, a neutral term, which itself is not a being” (42). This third term, Levinas points out, may be a “concept thought” by which “the individual that exists abdicates into the general that is thought,” or it may be “called sensation, in which objective quality and subjective affection are merged,” or it may finally “appear as *Being*, so as to distinguish it from the existent which thinks it” (42).

The reduction of alterity to a middle, neutral term assuages the anxiety referred to earlier that the subject feels concerning the security of its totality against any intrusion from the outside. Thus ontology, which allows for the comprehension of other beings, promotes a freedom from these other beings, a freedom “that is the identification of the same,” not allowing the subject to be “alienated by the other” (42). But to do this, exteriority must be effaced by the philosophical subject. “Western philosophy has most often been an ontology,” says Levinas, “a reduction of the other to the same by interposition of a middle and neutral term that ensures the comprehension of being” (43). Ontology

is therefore at times a neutralization of the other, a subsuming of alterity into a theme or an object. The freedom demanded by the “I” from all intrusion onto the totality which it commands is central to the ontological project; freedom then takes its ultimate meaning in the permanence of the same, or rather in the subject’s perseverance in its own being. Freedom then “does not resemble the capricious spontaneity of free will,” but this same perseverance in being, given as reason (43). For, in the end, “sovereign reason knows only itself,” and that “nothing other limits it” (430). Deployment of this reason or extended identity of the same is the sole duty of cognition. Thus, “philosophy is an egology” (44).

This egology marks Western philosophy since its beginnings. Socrates insisted on the “self-sufficiency of the same,” for he taught “to receive nothing of the Other but what is in me, as though from all eternity I was in possession of what comes to me from the outside” (44; 43). Philosophers like Duns Scotus and Ockham reduced knowledge of the exterior world to the surface intelligible to Being, and even further, to an intelligibility which enforced incessantly a return to the same. Descartes embarked upon a philosophical project with his *cogito* that came to exclude everything exterior, even the sensibility and corporeality of the thinking subject; only what was identifiable with the rational, thinking self could be deemed as intelligible.

Perhaps more pertinent to understanding philosophy as a totality, and even further, more relevant to the political and philosophical atmosphere of the modern period, are Levinas’s critiques of extensive philosophical systems. Hegelian dialectics obviously sets up a third, neutral term that renders free the other from its own identity, placing it within an elaborate system of an identity of the same. But even more, this system relies on an implicit understanding of the other as either confirmation or negation of the same. Karl Marx establishes a synecdoche, “homo faber,” a neutral

term constructed to bring about justice, but of course committed the injustice of excluding that which does not coincide with the elements of his system. But the philosopher Levinas concentrates most of his criticism against is his former teacher, Martin Heidegger. Within his philosophy, Heidegger converts the “existing of an existent” into pure intelligibility, where the existent’s “independence is a surrender in radiation” (45). Here, the individual has “lost its face,” and as become “inseparable from the comprehension of Being” (45). In short, Levinas says

To affirm the priority of **Being** over **existents** is to already decide the essence of philosophy; it is to subordinate the relation with someone, who is an existent, (the ethical relation) to a relation with the **Being of existents**, which, impersonal, permits the apprehension, the domination of existents (a relationship of knowing), [and] subordinates justice to freedom. (45)

“Being,” Levinas says elsewhere, “excludes all alterity” (“Enigma and Phenomena” 74). Ontology affirms a truth, which should “reconcile persons,” but in fact “exists anonymously,” which of course extends its anonymity to all other individuals under its grasp (Totality 46). Its universality, presented as impersonal, “is another inhumanity” (46).

To know ontologically then amounts to grasping things “out of nothing or reducing it to nothing, removing it from it its alterity” (44). For objects, the surrender of identity comes through conceptualization, but for human individuals, they can only be obtained “by the terror that brings a free man under the domination of another” (44). Levinas summarizes the ultimate significance of ontology in the following way:

Thematization and conceptualization, which moreover are inseparable, are not peace with the other but suppression or possession of the other. For possession affirms the other, but within a negation of its independence. “I think” comes down to “I can”—to an appropriation of reality. Ontology as first philosophy is a philosophy of power. (46)

As a philosophy of power, as a philosophy of freedom over the ethical relation with the other,

ontology is “a philosophy of injustice” (46). This injustice, this power, is necessary for the “I” to guard its dominance over the phenomena within its world, and ensure its freedom and separation from the world of exteriority. The only way of protruding into this totality is to put the very totality of the subject into question, which can only come about when the other comes within his own identity, free from the violence of the subject— that is, the other who approaches as truly Other.

For Levinas, the other as Other is the breach of totality (Totality 104). Our primary experience of the other person is not a substitution of his identity for an idea already given to perception, but a relation with a being whose identity exceeds comprehension. For as Levinas says, being is exteriority, and as exteriority no concept truly can lay hold of it (294). The relation with the other is therefore not ontology (“Is Ontology Fundamental?” 7). The other always exceeds the grasp of the conceptualization and comprehension which define totality, and as such it remains completely and absolutely exterior. The “I” encounters its world, as has been shown, through a grasping of alterity and recasting it into its own significations. Yet the face of the other is the sole instance of alterity which cannot have its signification given to it by another. It in essence exceeds all intentions to become signified within a totality. In addition, the model of signification as the repetition of the Same, which operates by having all signs signify the Self, now becomes frustrated by the face of the other because its uniqueness reveals no other referent for it. It signifies itself alone, and only it can signify for itself. In fact, its very act of signification overflows its function as a sign. Levinas calls this exceeding of intentionality, this surplus of being which overflows signification, Infinity. As Infinity, as the sign which cannot be signified, the face of the other foils all attempts to totalize it. Its permanence in exteriority, in a being which eludes the grasp of the thinking subject, immediately puts the freedom of the ego into question. As Levinas says, “my freedom does not have the last word; I

am not alone” (Totality 101). Here, the identity of the Same, which is but a separating of alterity from its own identity by a subject, is overrun, for the society with the other is not an addition to a totality but a shattering of a totality.

The face of the other calls the “I” into question, turning the subject’s will to power and freedom into a will to responsibility, which is but an inversion of freedom itself. Levinas goes as far as asking “is not the will thus at bottom humility rather than will to power?” (56). Not a humility which would be a “negation of one’s Self,” but rather an affirmation arising from the responsibility that the face of the other now signifies for the self (56). Levinas shows us with this critique of both philosophy and our primary experiences, that, as T. S. Eliot says in his Four Quartets,

We had the experience but missed the meaning,
And approach to the meaning restores the experience.

The experience then reveals that ontology as first philosophy, that is, the means through which the ego “knows” his world, is a falsification of exteriority; ontology occludes exteriority. The relation with the Other, which is absolutely ulterior and exterior to the subject, is ethics. Levinas sets up in opposition to that “first philosophy which identifies freedom and power” the ethical relation (47). It is only through the ethical relation that one does justice to the other, that one allows the identity of the other to remain wholly its own.

The face of the other as a primary experience holds ‘significance,’ if I may use the full implications of this word, in two areas that haunt consciousness throughout its existence. First is that of religion, a complex idea for Levinas which can only be hinted at here. Suffice it to say that the significance of the face, Infinity, reveals that its identity comes from another order, a wholly separate order than that of the totality set up by the “I.” Another world, Levinas says, like mine but not like

mine in that it cannot be comprehended. Levinas asks, “In the presence of the other, do we not respond to an order in which signifyingness remains an irremissable disturbance, an utterly bygone past?” (253). Such a signifyingness, he adds, shows us a beyond, the beyond from which the face comes signified as a “trace.” That is, its signification does bring its meaning present to the “I,” but immediately eludes the grasp of comprehension; it is constantly moving towards and flowing away, showing a presence and an absence at the same time. The face of the other is the trace of the infinite. Elsewhere, Levinas says without reservation that “religion is the relation with a being as a being” (“Is Ontology Fundamental?” 8).

The second area important for understanding the real impact of the face is that of language. The face creates transcendence, for its meaning refers to a past and distant order. Furthermore, it creates significance itself, before any signs can be had by the “I.” Levinas says, “it is not the mediation of the sign that forms signification, but signification (whose primordial event is the face to face) that makes the sign function possible” (206). Also, the calling into question by the face calls upon the ego to offer his world over to the other, as a gift and not as an attempt at domination or comprehension. This compulsion becomes the compulsion to generalize or universalize, so that language can become a common world, and can be grasped by another. Language as an exchange, as an extension of the social relation, commences with the face to face. Even further, responsibility founds the goal of reason, not understanding. If this aspect sounds circular, that is because Levinas attempts to show that the face to face precedes consciousness, and in fact establishes it; the very acts which make totalization possible (separation, signification, transcendence, thematization, discourse), are gifts from the infinite, and therefore our consciousness cannot get “behind” the event.

Chapter Two

Subjectivity and the Sins of Reading

“Who Is One-Self?”

Emmanuel Levinas’s “defense of subjectivity,” as he describes his work in *Totalité et infini*, begins with an analysis or de-structuring of subjectivity (26). Necessarily it must include philosophy because his is actually a critique of philosophy’s translation of the experiences that come to define subjectivity. As the structures of subjectivity are dismantled within Levinas’s works, so, too, are the structures of philosophy, revealing its foundation: an ego oscillating between itself and its world, a subject that journeys forth in the interests, the self-interests, of freedom and power. Nothing defines where freedom ends and power begins within a totality. It would be more correct to say that they are the dialectical poles between which the subject moves as it creates meaning within a totality, but they do, nevertheless, sustain the ego along the lines of self-interest, its life in “quant-a-soi” (“Qui est soi-même?” 82). Existence within this modality remains the expression of a person; alterity becomes reduced to either anonymity or a signature of the self. But there is a mode of subjectivity that precedes the “quant-a-soi,” that of “Pour l’autre”; freedom and power have their antecedents in ethics and responsibility. The very structure of *consciousness*, thought reflecting on itself, rests on the underlying structure of *conscience*, thought reflecting the other. As Levinas says, the *cogito*, or “je pense,” is not the self-generated activity that Western philosophy believes it to be— it is “socialité” (“Mépris de la Thora” 78).

This definition points to the phenomenological formulation of consciousness as always being a “consciousness-of ” something. The structure of consciousness, even in its most

primordial form, can be reduced always to this concept, even when it is reflecting upon itself, as in Descartes. Levinas's real philosophical foundations come from his encounter with phenomenology. In 1928, he entered the University of Freiburg for studies in phenomenology at the end of Edmund Husserl's teaching career and at the beginning of Martin Heidegger's, giving him the chance to attend lectures and seminars by both. Previously in Strasbourg, he had studied philosophers like Emile Durkheim and Henri Bergson, but it was the new philosophical "method" of phenomenology that inspired him, studying Husserl's Logische Untersuchungen and Ideen under Gabrielle Peiffer. Later collaborating with Peiffer, Levinas would give the first translation of Husserl's works into French, the Méditations cartésiennes: introduction à la phénoménologie, in 1931. Around this time Levinas was also publishing numerous essays that sought to illuminate the phenomenology of both Husserl and Heidegger, later collected in the 1941 work En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger. As will be shown, despite Levinas's concentration on the phenomenology of Husserl, at this early stage in his philosophical development he is giving a more Heideggerian reading of phenomenology.

Although he spent a great deal of time personally with Husserl, being invited to his home on several occasions, Levinas easily took to Heidegger's teachings and illuminations of the whole of Western philosophy presented in his lectures (Moran 323). Levinas for the most part agreed with Heidegger's criticisms of Husserl, specifically the latter's transcendental idealism and abstract egoism. In his philosophy, Heidegger imbued the phenomenological method with a concern for concrete modes of experience, like being-with-others (*Mitsein*), being-towards-death (*Sein zum Tode*), etc., all of which emphasized the finitude and transcendence of the individual, explicated through the famous term 'Dasein.' As Demot

Moran notes, Levinas attended Heidegger's lecture series "Introduction to Philosophy," where "Heidegger rejected Husserl's understanding of philosophy as a rigorous science, and saw philosophy as a way of understanding human transcendence" (323). For both Levinas and Heidegger, "human being-in-the-world is transcendence," that is, transcendence of consciousness and the ego which contains it (323). This comes to be a theme running through Levinas's later works, and it is interesting to note that one of Husserl's last seminars that Levinas attended was on intersubjectivity, something for which Levinas later criticizes Husserl as well as Heidegger; both, for Levinas, inadequately account for the subject's encounter with and knowledge of other consciousnesses or "Daseins." But he recognized Husserl's work for what it was, a new radical way for uncovering the essential features of conscious life, giving philosophy a new foundation for discovery and engagement with life as it is lived in the concrete, and not in the abstract.

Phenomenology as Radical Philosophy

As Levinas notes in his essay "Sur les 'Ideen' de M. E. Husserl," phenomenology is presented by Husserl as the "new science" which is to be the "foundation of the sciences of nature and mind, logic, psychology, theory of knowledge, and even metaphysics" (Discovering 3). This was essentially Husserl's aim throughout his works, to wipe away the naivete of natural and psychological sciences which, along with many other things, prevent adequate consideration of experience as it is originally revealed to us. Husserl also displays ambivalence regarding the dominant epistemological theories of his time. As Moran writes, Husserl bridged "two different worlds" (62). First, he was a university professor, exemplifying "the nineteenth century

bourgeois world with its high seriousness, solid confidence in science, rationality, and human progress through knowledge” (62). But Husserl’s age also was marked by the destabilizing effects of an earlier intellectual climate, namely the Enlightenment and the reaction to it in the early nineteenth century. The time of Husserl was replete with the overly wrought rationalisms of Hegel and his followers, as well as the positivism and strict empiricism of the acolytes of science— all of this in a time of economic, national and cultural upheaval. Moran notes that while Husserl enjoyed his status as professor and therefore defender of the faith of rationalism, “he was also acutely aware of the threat of cultural fragmentation and relativism brought about by deep uncertainties about the nature and project of reason in the twentieth century” (62).

Husserl, however, still held faith in this project, for his phenomenology rested on the scientific principles of his day, namely that reason can lead man to higher knowledge, and thus to higher states. In fact, he never stopped considering himself to be a scientist, even though his domain was in philosophy. For instance, in his Cartesian Meditations, he praises Descartes for “reforming philosophy into a science grounded on an absolute foundation,” claiming that Descartes’ work, once properly evaluated and explained, entailed a “reformation of all the sciences,” potentially giving to them a “scientific genuineness” (Cartesian 1;1;2). All of this, of course, was but part of the journey he was leading to deliver the sciences back into a sure ground for all knowledge, that of transcendental subjectivity, that is, the world as it is lived through the conscious subject, a realm not only abandoned by the sciences, but set up as the antithesis of true science. What cannot be illustrated as a universal principle, or testable hypothesis, does not receive the mark of authentic knowledge. But for Husserl, subjectivity, not a third person objectivity, would rescue science from the fragmentation and scepticism it created. For Husserl,

phenomenology would clear the path to this experience, given as it is within that basis for all experience, consciousness itself, before knowledge, beliefs, emotions, et.al. appear and construct the world before us. Thus phenomenology would be a theory of science, or a *Wissenschaftslehre*, a science of science, a “rigorous clarification of what essentially belongs to systematic knowledge as such” (Moran 60). Phenomenology, therefore, would work to construct the knowledge, creating a *Letztbegründung*, or ultimate grounding, on which the sciences would remake themselves so as to avoid error and thus become what they were truly meant to be. The sciences, like all of philosophy, were caught up in an approach to the world that Husserl called “natural” or “naïve.” As Levinas writes, the natural sciences do attempt to overcome the “vagueness and approximation of the naïve experience of perception,” but do not get beyond the “naturalistic stance in the world (*Théorie* 9). Furthermore, this “naturalistic philosophy” is overcome by Husserl with a “new conception of being,” one that realizes for philosophy that

intuition, understood as the theoretical act of consciousness that makes objects present to us, is not only a mode of knowledge among others but is the original phenomenon which makes truth possible. (*Théorie* xxxvi)

The sciences “make use of a certain number of fundamental notions whose meaning the sciences themselves do not clarify—for example, memory, space, time, etc. These notions determine the necessary structure of different domains of being and constitute their essence” (3). Science can give us knowledge of the world only insofar as it relates to the assumptions it brings already to the things it studies. That is, it can give us cause and effect, unities, estimations, inferences, etc. according to the natural laws it assumes are everywhere present, but science as of yet cannot give the meaning of the experiences which serve as a foundation for these unities and inferences (9). Phenomenology, however, by going back to, as Husserl so often puts it, the things

themselves, by asking what it means that these objects are given over to consciousness, by asking “what their transcendence or objectivity means *for consciousness*, is to inquire at the same time about the meaning of the bare existence of things” (Discovering 11). For the only existence “about which one can reasonably speak,” and thus be sure of, “is the existence which is revealed to consciousness” (11). Only within consciousness can the exact modes of being be revealed and grasped. Therefore, phenomenology leads to a distinct theory of being, or ontology (Théorie 3).

Part of this new “Husserlian concept of ontology” is the idea that “the structure of being which is the object of ontology is not everywhere the same” (3). Diverse and distinct regions of being are to be discovered through the acts of consciousness which determine them. Thus, being is not as it is with the natural standpoint, that is, an “empty and uniform characteristic superimposed” on the world (4). And, furthermore, these acts of consciousness are to be discerned by the objects at which consciousness aims. This leads to the second fundamental element of Husserl’s philosophy that Levinas clarifies and establishes as a primary feature of phenomenology: consciousness is always consciousness-of-something. Additionally, the modes of consciousness are not limited to knowledge as it is with the sciences; phenomenology establishes that all modes are valid, whether they be understanding, perception, sensation, emotion, etc. Thus desire is always desire of something, sensation is always sensation of something, anxiety is always anxiety over something, and so on. For Husserl, this “fundamental property of consciousness” is intentionality (Discovering 13). Levinas is careful to note that

it must be clearly understood that intentionality is not a bond between two psychological states, one of which is the act and the other the object. Nor is it a bond between consciousness on one side and the real object on the other. Husserl’s great originality is to see that the ‘relation to the object’ is not

something inserted between consciousness and the object; it is consciousness itself. *It is the relation to the object that is the primitive phenomenon—and not a subject and an object that would supposedly move toward one another.* (13)

Phenomenology then becomes the “concrete study of different structures of that primitive phenomenon, the ‘relation to the object,’ or intentionality” (13). It must be noted here that Husserl’s work attracted Levinas not only because of the new areas it opened up to philosophy by being concerning solely with lived concrete experience, nor only the criticism of rationalism and science and identification of a crisis in the West. Most influential on Levinas’s own thought was Husserl’s fundamental assertion that philosophy until then had conceived of the subject in a naïve or naturalistic manner; it assumed that consciousness is alone, and that the world in which it lives comes after the fact of its existence. Husserl showed that consciousness cannot be distinguished from the object at which it is directed. Levinas says “this view exposes the falseness of the traditional formulation of the problem of knowledge” (13).

Phenomenology as Radical Method

Perhaps Husserl’s greatest contribution to philosophy was his phenomenological method, or more precisely, his method of phenomenological reduction, a method by which one overcomes the natural or naïve stance in the world. It is, according to Levinas, “the method by which we are going back to concrete man” (Théorie 146). Husserl points to Descartes who in a way anticipated this clearing away of things to get to the bare essences of the world surrounding the thinking subject. Levinas writes: “Instead of positing the existence of the world as we do in the natural attitude, we are suspending our judgment, as Descartes does when he exercises his doubt with respect to all his assertions” (146). Husserl points out, though, that Descartes’s doubt

has about it “the character of a universal negation” (147). Instead, phenomenology begins as a “presuppositionless science,” one that begins in “absolute poverty” (Moran 126). Dermot Moran writes that though the phenomenological reduction as Husserl conceived it began as a simple resistance to preconceived ideas derived from science, philosophy, etc., it came to be

the most radical form of self-questioning, involving a kind of Cartesian overthrow of all previous assumptions to knowledge, and a questioning of many of our ‘natural’ intuitions about the nature of our mental processes or the make-up of the objective world. Nothing [in the reduction] must be taken for granted or assumed external to the lived experiences themselves as they are lived. (126)

Piece by piece, things are removed or “bracketed” until all that is left, according to Husserl, will be the given mode of consciousness and its intended object. This reduction is necessary to overcome the natural attitude and its conventions that predetermine experience, obviously, but the reduction also allows the phenomenologist to isolate the core structure of subjectivity, “putting out of action” (*ausser Aktion zu setzen*) elements which prohibit the return or *Rückgang* to a transcendental standpoint. At this point the *epoche* is reached, a term Husserl adapted from the Greek Sceptics and introduced in *Ideen*, denoting the moment at which the basic objectifying acts of consciousness are properly grasped, and become “clear and distinct,” to use the term Husserl borrows from Descartes.

What the phenomenological reduction does is to move from the empirical, natural ego and arrive at the transcendental ego, that underlying element of consciousness which allows it to encounter the world of objects. Two features of this reduction must be explained at this point. First, Husserl holds that whatever features of conscious experience are reached through the *epoche* must be taken as they appear, without judging them as ‘real,’ false,’ or ‘illusory,’ because what is essential here is the engagement of the world by consciousness through intentionality,

that is, the way the transcendent ego transcends itself and discovers meaning in its world. Second, to some this may sound as if phenomenology betrays itself, by moving from the concrete to the more nebulous data of consciousness, and that phenomenology here fails as a 'science' since it flees judgment and precision and embraces the as of yet indeterminate data. Levinas reminds us that the opposite at this level of analysis is true, for "to try to express exactly the inexact data of perception is to deprive them of their life and concreteness" (Theory of Intuition 117). Only by affirming objects as they correspond to abstractions, categories and deductions are they known, but also at that point they are removed from their initial and primary grasping by intentionality, and thus are no longer concrete, but abstract. This is a feature of phenomenology which Heidegger and Levinas will both adhere to in their own philosophies, for what Husserl describes at this point with his method is the grasping of essences, the structures by which things are given over to intentionality, and that by which the things of the world are first known. These essences are features of the objective world such as round, hot, fast, red, dark, etc., and as Levinas says, "it is primarily through those inexact concepts that we determine the essence of the world" (117). These essences are called by Husserl *eide*, the Greek word for idea, and so phenomenology comes to be called by Husserl an "eidetic science."

Intentionality and the Significance of Being

Levinas sees the role of intentionality as the distinguishing feature in Husserl's turn from the realistic attitude of the Logische Untersuchungen to the transcendental idealism given in Ideen, a turn in Husserl's phenomenology that becomes the focal point of criticism from both Levinas and Heidegger. However, it is a turn that is inevitable. Before this is elucidated, it must

be understood just how consciousness comes to be the foundation of the phenomenological analysis, after everything is ‘bracketed’ out of the way.

In short, the objects of the world remain transcendent, that is, outside consciousness, for to properly grasp them, consciousness must transcend itself and reach beyond itself to become conscious of that something. However, consciousness itself can become data for consciousness by becoming its own object of perception. In a way that echoes both Kant and Descartes, Husserl holds that concomitant with every empirical act of consciousness is a transcendent consciousness that can perceive itself within its own act. For example, when I see a tree, I can immediately become conscious not only of the tree that I am perceiving, but also of my act of perceiving the tree. Within this perception, the tree, like any object in the world outside of consciousness, is said to be *transcendent*, while my consciousness which perceives itself in the act of perception is said to be *immanent*. As immanent, it is wholly able to be known and perceived; only that which lies outside of consciousness cannot be fully known. Husserl refers to a table for an example. In perceiving a table, I cannot, because of my existential situation within time and space, see all aspects of the table. I see the table in successive acts, and due to its essence, it carries with it a unity so that the successive acts become the sensations, or *hyletic* data as Husserl refers to it, of an object in the material world of time and space (even if I were to create a wall of mirrors that allowed me to see all parts of the table, I would still not be perceiving the table as a whole, since I cannot perceive every image at the same time, and the image in the mirror and the table itself are not the same thing). In Logische, intentionality is essentially equated with the fact that all consciousness is consciousness of something, with this something being totally “conceivable outside of consciousness” (Théorie 54). As Levinas

writes, “immanent analysis of consciousness finds only hyletic data . . . acts, and intentions, while the correlate of those acts do not belong to consciousness but to the world of objects” (54). However, the phenomenological analysis leads inevitably to the “decisive step” Husserl takes in Ideen to think through the idea of intentionality and see that

the opposition between consciousness and objects makes no sense, and that it is in consciousness, in intentionality, that one finds the truly concrete and primary phenomenon which is the ground of the opposition between object and subject. (54)

Moreover, Husserl “calls the subjective side of intentionality, the apprehensions (*Auffassungen*) which animate the hyletic data, *noeses* (54). Opposed to them are their correlate, the things of which consciousness is conscious of, which are called *noemata* (54). The important movement here in Husserl’s thought is that the noemata are not identical to the objects of consciousness. Thus, every act of intentionality is based on a presentation, or as Levinas says, “representation will always be the foundation of all acts” (62). At this point, Levinas distinguishes between signifying acts and acts of intuition, the term Husserl uses for the act of consciousness which perceives being as it is, that is, comes into contact with being. He says that an intuitive act reaches its object, while a signifying act only aims at it (65). So, the intentional acts of consciousness can either be intuitive, as when it contemplates an actual object, or signifying, as when it contemplates things within memory or imagination within the realm of “pure thought.” The difference between them “does not lie in their objects, and the problem of correlating them is fictitious . . . Pure thought is a modality of life at the same level as the presence to being” (68). Within both acts of intentionality, consciousness transcends itself, only the intuitive act is given over in perception, while the signifying act is given over to consciousness within reflection.

If we know that perception or intuition is the only true way by which consciousness grasps being, the intuitive act is that which must be analyzed if we are to seek true knowledge of being. But the intuitive act necessarily contains transcendent objects, and as was said before, transcendent objects cannot be known wholly, only immanent objects can— yet, the only truly immanent object is consciousness itself. Therefore, phenomenology must withdraw into the subject through the phenomenological method and reflect, i.e. through signifying acts, the acts of perception or intuition. As Levinas writes, “it is through reflecting on the act of perception that we must seek the origin of the very notion of being” (72).

The dilemma within phenomenology, as Levinas sees it, is this very “intellectualism” of Husserl’s concept of intentionality, for it comes to be but an epistemology based on the act of representation. Objects constituted for consciousness are in fact constituted within consciousness; as such, consciousness is always a return to the self, a circuit which consciousness never moves beyond. As Colin Davis notes, intentionality marks the element from which Levinas builds his critiques of Husserl and Heidegger (18-19). It also marks the point of divergence for Levinas from Husserl’s phenomenology. In La théorie de l’intuition dans la phénoménologie de Husserl, intuition is the modality of contact with the external world for the subject (19). But by En découvrant l’existence avec Husserl et Heidegger, Levinas’s own thought had matured, and had deemed intentionality as the manner by which the subject is sealed off from the external world (19). Edith Wyschogrod sees within intentionality the act of the representation, and since representation “refuses what is exterior to its own instant in time,” it presents a subject solely “attuned to himself,” coinciding with his own thought (39). “What is at stake in Levinas’s discussion of intentionality” after La théorie de l’intuition, Davis says, “is the

ability of consciousness to encounter something other than itself. If meaning is entirely given by the subject rather than found in the world, then consciousness cannot experience, perceive or learn anything that it did not already contain” (19).

Levinas notes continually in his earlier works that phenomenology echoes Cartesianism in its withdrawal into the subject, a positive move in that it is the surest way of going “to the things themselves,” but he reveals its negative result in restructuring consciousness as a monad: “L’esprit est une monade,” as Levinas writes (En découvrant l’existence 80). Since the “subject’s coexistence with something other” is a “relation of intellection,” the relation becomes established in self-evidence (82). This “idealism” is “best expressed by this positing of the subject as monad” (82). The subject in Husserl’s works is given as an origin, “the place where everything is answerable for itself” (84). Despite the world’s presence and the subject’s sociality, the inevitability of solitude leads to a removal of the subject from its involvements—“Precisely as a thought, I am a monad” (84).

Freedom comes to be the “superior force” in subjectivity for Husserl, dominating thought “prior to its exercise,” making of consciousness “an absolute autonomy” (83). Levinas comes to regard the phenomenology of Husserl as a “philosophy of freedom, accomplished as, and defined by, consciousness” (84). Phenomenology as revealed by Husserl answers the need for an absolute knowledge, but ultimately subordinates this need to “the freedom that expresses the claim to be an ego and to be, with respect to being, origin” (85). This critique of Levinas, as Edith Wyschogrod says, is the impulse behind Levinas’s turn from Husserl to Heidegger, which is the turn from an idealism to a more concrete figure of activity, that of *Dasein*, which engages in the existence of Being by engaging in the activities of its own existence (50). Levinas says:

For Heidegger, my life is not simply a game that in the final analysis is played for a thought. [. . .] The structure is neither free nor absolute; it is no longer entirely answerable for itself. It is dominated and overwhelmed by history, by its origin, about which it can do nothing, since it is thrown into the world and this abandonment marks all its projects and powers.

(84)

Levinas establishes his break with Husserl by opposing the founding of subjectivity in an existence that ultimately proves itself to be one of freedom, idealism, and severance from the outside world. Heidegger's philosophy seemed to hold out for another possibility, for a more concrete existence, defined by the activities it undertakes to engage the world. But ultimately, Levinas comes to see a similar structure to subjectivity operating underneath both philosophies. Within Heidegger, Levinas will see the other side of philosophical subjectivity inherent to the West, that of power, the collaborator with freedom in the realm of subjectivity.

***Dasein* and the Structure of Being**

Husserl's philosophy can be defined by the autonomous subject that grounds his phenomenological project. His ideas, concepts and terms focus on the conclusions drawn from the exercises of a theoretical ego, free of contingencies, existing as an idealized subject. Heidegger, on the other hand, sought to redeem phenomenology from this transcendental idealism by grounding his philosophy in the analyses of a *Dasein*, literally a "being-there," a non-abstract being grounded within the frames of time and space, just as with everyday existence itself, as it is lived in the concrete. In short, Heidegger takes Husserl's philosophy to its full implications by asserting that the essence of subjectivity is at all times a structure, and not a pure, autonomous substance.

As Pierre Keller has noted in his book, Husserl and Heidegger on Human Experience, Heidegger worked to “undercut” the “methodological solipsism of Husserl” (111). By doing so, he hoped to set himself against the whole of Western philosophical tradition, particularly the alienation of the subject from the objects it perceives and the world in which these objects are perceived, especially after the influence of Descartes. Opposed to the traditional model of understanding in which a subject confronts an object, Heidegger models understanding on the idea of “*In-der-Welt-sein*,” or “being-in-the-world,” wherein what it is to be human essentially involves a relation to other entities and in particular the world where such entities are to be found (112).

As was shown, Husserl’s phenomenology up to the time Heidegger published his work Sein und Zeit, despite Husserl’s ambitions to return to the concrete realm of “things themselves,” is characterized by an idealized solipsism, grounded in an abstract subject whose inner world lays the groundwork for philosophical investigation. The content of his investigations came to be mere representations constructed by the subject, emanating from his interaction with his world, yes, but ultimately revealing the separation of the subject from that world. Later, Levinas will show through his own writings how Husserl’s phenomenology was imbued not so much with solipsism as much as the possibility of solipsism, as he says in the 1940 essay “The Work of Edmund Husserl” (Discovering 85). It is important to note that this was the critique of Husserl’s work of both Levinas and Heidegger, and that this was their critique at this particular time. This “snapshot” of the philosophical development of all three at this time is given for several reasons. First, of course, it shows just how Heidegger’s philosophy developed from that of Husserl and why it attracted Levinas as it did. Despite the contentious nature of the

relationship to Heidegger in Levinas's works, justified though it is, it belies the actual concordances between the two. Second, Levinas's works dealing centrally with Husserl and Heidegger emanate from the work both thinkers had done up to this time; afterwards, it can be said, whatever resonances Husserl and Heidegger have in Levinas's later works can still be traced back to both thinkers' works made around the time of Sein und Zeit. Third, and most importantly, Levinas's own thought germinates in part from the milieu of the University of Freiburg at this time, where he studied under both Husserl and Heidegger, absorbing their philosophical thought, and from which he launched into his own philosophical ventures. His critiques of their works both produced around this time, particularly their shortcomings regarding the analysis of how the subject encounters alterity, stand alongside Levinas's reaction to the political atmosphere that grew in Germany in the 1930's, especially the revelation of Heidegger's support of and affiliations with the National Socialist party, as the earliest and most substantial influences on his own philosophical thought, outside of the later embrace, or re-embrace, of his Jewish heritage and identity. Since the aim here is to elucidate the philosophical roots of Levinas's critique of subjectivity, the discussion of Heidegger's work will be limited to Sein und Zeit, and will be presented through the lens of Levinas's writings, specifically his early essay "Martin Heidegger et l'ontologie," written in 1932, after his encounter with Heidegger, but before his departure from Heidegger's ontological investigations. This limitation will also, to some degree, bring into relief the exact extent of Heidegger's influence on Levinas.

The first of these influences has already been given, that of Heidegger's turn from Husserl's autonomous substance for explicating subjectivity, that of the transcendental ego or the theoretical consciousness, to a subjectivity seen as a structured event, more "mundane," if that

word is kept true to its etymological root, *mundus*. This “worldliness” refers to the way life is lived in the concrete, as a “being-in-the-world.” Heidegger in a way leaps in front of Husserl’s transcendental ego, since consciousness is but a return of the thinking subject to its own actions of thinking. Heidegger places the foundation of his work in the subject which is just reaching beyond itself, seeking transcendence in the midst of being constituted, and not the subject already constituted, returning to itself so it can sufficiently account for that transcendence. Levinas gives the brief history of this “idealism” in his essay on Martin Heidegger, noting that it was Descartes who gave to philosophy the method of investigating being as going within a subjectivity “enclosed within itself,” searching “within its own interior for signs of its conformity with being” (“Martin Heidegger” 12). Thus thought, “in reaching out towards objects,” never actually takes leave of itself, “since its objects— considered as ideas and contents of thought— are, in a certain sense, already within it” (12). After Descartes, the “thinking substance” will never have to reunite with “extended substance,” for it will “recover that extended substance within itself” (12). This is for Levinas very important, for his turn to Heidegger hinges on the problem of transcendence, which subsumes the problem of subjectivity. The error within idealism’s model of subjectivity is not that it is not logically secure, for it is to a great extent. The error lies within the possibility of escaping that subjectivity to encounter the world within which it is posited; in sum, it is the problem of accounting for subjectivity’s moment of transcendence. The hermeneutics that Heidegger reveals to be employed by the subject in its everyday mode of existing accounts for this transcendence, since Dasein’s most fundamental mode of existing is structural. That is, Dasein’s being is never a nebulous substance or essence; the essence of Dasein is rather “being-in-the-world,” just as Husserl’s

notion of intentionality gave the essence of consciousness as always a “consciousness of something.”

Not only does the hermeneutic of Dasein reveal how the escape from subjectivity is gained, but it also reveals how the return to subjectivity becomes possible, through the understanding of Being Dasein relies upon to make sense of its world and its place within it. The movement from subjectivity is but a grasping on Dasein’s part for the sake of understanding; “returning to itself,” in a way, describes the possibility of its understanding, of assimilating whatever encounter with alterity so that it can be fixed within a matrix of comprehension, assimilated into a field of reference. In short, the return is the reading of signification that Dasein employs to create meaning in its world. Here we see the similarities among all three, Husserl, Heidegger, and Levinas, regarding the way subjectivity “reads” its world. Paralleling the structure of language, the subject’s hermeneutical means of creating meaning allows the unknown to become known, and in a certain sense permits access to the world and the things within it. This “signifying” feature of the everyday hermeneutic of existence gives form and content to the chaotic data that the subject takes in, creating significance where there was none, so that what is external to the subject can be grasped and comprehended.

For Husserl, of course, that means that the data given to consciousness arises from certain structures that bridge the gap between subject and object, termed *noemata*. Heidegger alters this notion slightly to account for the subject before it transcends itself, saying that Dasein always conducts itself “in an understanding of Being” (Being and Time 25). Important is the distinction that it is through an understanding of Being, and not a knowledge of Being, for the

latter would denote the subject as already having returned to itself. Understanding, however, implies a comprehension of Being before Being can be grasped through knowledge. Transcendence for Heidegger is a seeking out of Being by a being, and “every seeking gets guided beforehand by what is sought” (24). The conclusion can only be that “the meaning of Being must already be available to us in some way” (25). The world for Dasein is a “relational totality,” and within these relations, Dasein “‘signifies’ to itself” (120). Heidegger holds that one of the essential features of Dasein is that it already lives in an understanding of Being, so that any meaning it encounters is *a priori* constituted to reflect Dasein, and interpreted in terms of Being.

It is not too strict an interpretation of Sein und Zeit to say that the hermeneutic of Dasein it contains shows that the fundamental structure of Dasein, and therefore of subjectivity in general, is the same as it is for Levinas: the structure of discourse. Heidegger says as much by pointing out that λογος [logos] means ‘to make manifest,’ allowing something to be seen (56). This aspect of λογος [logos] is *Rede* or discourse [ἀπόφανσις], for it “lets us see something,” making it at once “accessible to the other party” (56). Furthermore, from this function of discourse things are seen, giving to λογος [logos] the “structural form of συνθεσις [synthesis]” (56). Discursive logos, if it can be called that, is not a linking together of representations but rather a “purely apophantical signification,” a “letting something be seen in its *togetherness* [*Beisammen*] with something— letting it be seen *as* something” (56). Heidegger here emphasizes togetherness not to show the unity of objects within the world, but to show how the meaning of an object in some way is conjoined to other objects, and to Dasein itself, through reference. Being is that ultimate referent within discourse and within the system of

significations that Dasein instills within his world to make it meaningful for him. As Levinas writes within one of his explications of Heidegger's work, "the understanding of being is the determining characteristic and the fundamental fact of human existence" ("Martin Heidegger" 15).

Levinas also stresses that time makes up the very "*fact of being itself*," for it is within the realm of temporality that Dasein lives (12). This idea originates within Husserl's work, specifically the idea that consciousness creates its own identity out of the perceptions of its existence. That is, the "I" is that pole of identity which remains constant throughout the temporal phases of sensory perception; it is the "I" at the center of perceptions of colors that "I see," of sounds that "I hear," of affective moods that "I feel," and so on. While every other thing makes itself both present and absent, there yet not fully there, the "I" of conscious identity is there as it was and will be. In a sense, it is reconstituted from the interpretations of objects that the subject uses to "read" its world." Heidegger goes further to reiterate that time, as temporality, constitutes the fundamental mode of being for all entities. Within his discussion of the interpretation of Being itself, temporality operates in the "covering" and "uncovering" that takes place as Being is manifested to Dasein, parallel to a certain degree the "presence and absence" of objects for Husserl, and more importantly, the "diachrony" of signification that will become a central feature of Levinas's work. But to return to the discussion, the essential feature of time is not a frame in which man exists, not an accident, to borrow from Aristotle; the temporalization of time is "precisely this understanding of being" that Heidegger reveals as the essence of a person's being ("Martin Heidegger" 16). Thus Heidegger constructs Dasein, or *Da-sein*, literally a "being- there," as rooted in space and time, interpreting things not out of the

perception of their essences, but out of the horizons of Dasein's existence from which they manifest. These horizons make up the concrete structures which make Dasein a "being-within-the-world." For Levinas, this is man not in his idealized form, but in his existential and true form (17).

Heidegger and the Power of Being

Within the world of structures composed essentially for Dasein, objects are recast to be, in essence, signs of Dasein. Levinas illustrates that Dasein encounters things not so much to determine what they are, but to determine the manner in which things "*encounter Dasein*" ("Martin Heidegger" 18). Levinas also makes use of the fact, at first positively but later in a more critical fashion, that Heidegger begins his discussion of the world within which Dasein exists as one consisting of "tools," objects which enter into Dasein's intentional grasp to reveal their "handlability," Levinas's translation of *Zuhandenheit* or "readiness-to-hand" (19). By emphasizing the elucidation of handlability in Sein und Zeit, Levinas sought to oppose the notion of representation as the mode of encountering what is external to the subject. Pointing once again to Husserl, Levinas says that within this representational mode, "the representation of what is handled precedes the handling itself" (18). Contrasting that, Heidegger holds that the handling of objects comes first, just as understanding comes before knowledge. Objects come to light through what Heidegger calls "concern," a reaching towards objects to reveal their structures and possibilities as tools, and therefore as "signs": Levinas says that the structure of handlability is "constituted by referral," or as Heidegger refers to it, by "circumspection," wherein Dasein "reads" an object in regards to the world in which the object appears, so as to

render it intelligible and meaningful (19). Therefore, tools are always given “in tandem with other tools” (19). Furthermore, the mode of being of tools “entails giving precedence to the totality of the *function* in relation to which the tool exists” (19). Having their identity determined according to Dasein’s field of significations, tools are what can be called “ready-to-hand.” Heidegger gives this mode of encountering the world as one in which the objects fail to stand out on their own; instead, they are absorbed within the world, standing ready to serve the function assigned to them. They undergo a “de-severance,” by which Dasein brings them into its presence, where they are given “directionality” (Being and Time 138-143). Primary signification for objects, then, is functionality, or instrumentality (“Martin Heidegger” 19).

When the tool is damaged, however, it stands out from its previous field of references, and comes to be “present-at-hand,” at which time it loses the character of being a tool, and becomes “a simple presence” (20). “Thus the world is announced,” says Levinas for then the world is brought forth from its concealment, to use Heidegger’s term. As Heidegger says, equipment moves from a functional mode of concern for Dasein to a “deficient mode of concern” once equipment announces itself anew, becoming conspicuous, obstinate and obtrusive (Being and Time 102-3). Being present-at-hand shows a “*break* in those referential contexts which circumspection discovers (105). Yet, the world is not constituted by the aggregate sum of tools for Dasein, because a totality depends on the condition that things “remain in the background,” and thus do not come forward into perception with their own identity (“Martin Heidegger” 20). Levinas discusses these elements of transcendence in light of an overall discussion of what transcendence is according to Heidegger, i.e., “the act of taking leave of oneself to reach objects” (22). He continues by saying that this basic structure of transcendence

“conditions the transcendence of subject to object,” calling it an “essentially ecstatic” mode of being for Dasein (22).

This level of being, this Being-in-the-world in which objects come to Dasein as ready-to-hand, should be seen as primordial for Dasein, necessary before Dasein can enter into a mode of introspection or reflection. This is one of the keenest insights Heidegger makes in Being and Time, due in part, of course, to Husserl’s demand that phenomenology go to life as it is lived in the concrete. But what Husserl assumed was a consciousness accompanying these acts within everyday existence, a consciousness accessible by reflection. Heidegger understood that regarding things as present-at-hand, which designates a consciousness reflecting on its existence, assumes a world whose Being has already been constituted; yet, Being is not constituted until it falls within the grasp or “concern” of Dasein. In any act of understanding, relations must have been previously disclosed (Being and Time 120). For Heidegger, knowing is a mode of Dasein founded upon Being-in-the-world, a Being which, “as a basic state, must be Interpreted *beforehand*” (90). Within knowing, therefore, “Dasein achieves a *new status of Being* [*Seinsstand*] towards a world which has already been discovered in Dasein itself (90). Thus, “Even the forgetting of something, in which every relationship of Being towards what one formerly knew has seemingly been obliterated, must be conceived *as a modification of the primordial Being-in*; and this holds for every delusion and for every error” (90).

Heidegger continues this explanation by saying that the kind of “dealing” closest to Dasein is, once again, not knowledge or even “a bare perceptual cognition”; in fact, it is “that kind of concern which manipulates things and puts them to use” (95). Objects in the world, before they come to be objects for knowledge, are “simply what gets used, what gets produced,

and so forth” (95). As Levinas says, within ontology, “production is oriented towards the consumer” (“Martin Heidegger” 20). This “functionality” aspect of Dasein’s primordial mode of understanding, that of “Being-in-the-world,” already points to this understanding not only as the model of transcendence, but also as a model of power, that power which a subject struggles to maintain over its world. Levinas maintains even in his earliest depositions of Heidegger’s philosophy, before he was ever to critique Heidegger’s *Sein* as a neuter by which the subject maintains and distributes power, that the concern of readiness-to-hand affirms the being of objects, determining “the manner in which they *encounter Dasein*, the manner *in which* they are” (18). Because handling does not encounter objects already known to Dasein, their “handlability” is never “a simple ‘presence’ on which new property is grafted,” like a quality (18). This mode of existence is in a sense rendered *for them, by Dasein*, which constitutes them as a way of understanding them, by assigning them reference to the world at large. Ultimately, they are already signs which refer back to Dasein, the fundamental referent in this “constructed” web of meaning. Just as tools are lost within the function they serve for Dasein, all things within the world become occluded, their function and thus their identity given to them by Dasein, so that they come to signify Dasein. Heidegger shows that meaning within the world comes from a familiarity with the relationships that things in the world have to Dasein (Being and Time 120). Within this familiarity, “Dasein ‘signifies’ to itself,” creating in essence “the structure of the world” (120).

Heidegger’s analysis of Dasein’s everyday hermeneutics reveals that the urge for power, the struggle for the subject’s “imperialism of the same,” as Levinas calls it, goes beyond the layer of understanding entailed within this assignment of functionality (Totality 87).

Underneath, and even within, the act of signification are two things, the first of which is Dasein's incessant anticipation of its own possibilities. Dasein's "existence itself is composed of possibilities," that is, possibilities of its own modes of Being ("Martin Heidegger" 23). Within the act of signifying, Dasein, "in a primordial manner . . . gives itself both its Being and its potentiality-for-Being as something which it is to understand with regard to its Being-in-the-world" (Being and Time 120). Dasein's "involvement" in its world is its pre-ordained world of references that objects make up within its world. In sum, these potentialities are the structures with regard to Dasein that Heidegger elucidates throughout Being and Time, such as "being-with," "in-order-to," "for-the-sake-of-which," and so on (120). Dasein encounters things as events which lend to it possibilities of its own Being; as Levinas explains, these possibilities are modes of Dasein's "very existence," for "To-be-in-the-world is to be one's possibilities" ("Martin Heidegger" 23). Thus, Dasein assumes its power over objects within the world by predetermining the very relevance or relation of these objects to its own Being. "Existence," says Levinas, "has the appearance of anticipating itself" (23). It is this anticipation of possibilities which make understanding, in fact, possible for Dasein.

Also within the act of signification is that more emotive element, what Levinas calls "affectivity," describing the function of moods or states-of-mind that Heidegger sees as fundamental to the way Dasein becomes situated within its world. At one point in his investigation into Heidegger's work, Levinas refers to the ontology being presented as a "hermeneutics of affectivity" (24). For Heidegger, this affectivity, discerned through moods, discloses Dasein's "*Being-in-the-world as a whole, and [makes] it possible first of all to direct oneself towards something*" (Being and Time 176). Thus, states-of-mind are not the mere

indications of the inner condition of Dasein— they determine the way in which Dasein's being is oriented towards its world. This explanation goes far towards indicating how it is that Dasein comes to understand its world before it can come to “know” it through reflection. It could be said that moods reveal the very way in which knowledge of that world is constructed. Only through moods or states-of-mind, Heidegger shows, are those things which *matter* to Dasein to be disclosed, for “a state-of-mind implies a disclosive submission to the world” (177). We are *never* outside of moods, even when we take leave of a certain mood: “when we master a mood, we do so by way of a counter-mood” (175). Even more, states-of-mind and instances of understanding are, for Heidegger and ultimately for Levinas, fundamentally acts of discourse; both are “existentially equiprimordial” with discourse (172, 203). As acts of discourse, they are structures, just as consciousness is always a “consciousness *of* something,” but even further, they are openings onto Dasein's own possibilities. Levinas writes that these moods reveal Dasein to be always “riveted to its possibilities” (24). For Dasein, being riveted to its mode of existence is also being “thrown” into it; Levinas translates Heidegger's *Geworfenheit* for this condition as “délivrance.” (24). Levinas refers to this thrownness as “the source and foundation of affectivity” (24). The reason for this claim becomes clear with his discussion of “angoisse,” Heidegger's *Angst* or anxiety, that mode of affectivity which brings Dasein out of its totality, its world of “tools,” and back into the world as world(30). And it will also become clear that this discussion of anguish reveals subjectivity as given through Heidegger's Dasein to be a formulation of power, an anxiety, in essence, over its ability to recast the landscape of its world within its understanding.

Dasein within affectivity reveals a “double direction,” for it reflects Husserl’s notion of intentionality by moving not only toward an object within the world, but also toward itself, turning back to “take stock of itself” (29). At this primal level of understanding, then, Levinas shows that Dasein always regards its world within a mode or a structure that continuously refers back to itself. Again, these are the “potentialities” of Dasein given earlier which share with the phenomenological definition of consciousness the feature of being not essences, but events; that is, just as consciousness is structured at all times as a “consciousness *of*,” the act of understanding continually refers the object back to the entity which brings it into its gaze. This structure becomes best comprehended through the notion of “discourse,” or perhaps “language.” Therein lies the reason for the tendency of both Levinas and Heidegger to refer to the basic structure of understanding, everyday hermeneutics, as being in essence the source of language and speech. The significance for the power of the subject, however, comes to the fore when the act of understanding, again at this fundamental level, is seen less as an attempt to gain knowledge and more as the condition of being “thrown” into an indifferent nothingness that is signaled by a world of objects beyond or even at the limits of Dasein’s existence. Within anguish, Levinas says, objects are “indeterminate,” revealing an “indifference” that all objects have before they are defined by Dasein. Anguish as a way of being presents the simple presence of things, “the nonimportance, the insignificance, the nothingness” of objects; but, it also pulls Dasein “from its dispersion into things,” out of its totalized world of tools and functions (30). As with the broken tool which goes from being ready-to-hand to being present-at-hand, the world is once again “announced” (20). This announcement, however, puts Dasein immediately into question. That simple presence which stands outside of Dasein’s grasp, just at the edges of

its comprehension, comes into presence, but never comes *fully* into presence, due to its obstinacy with regard to Dasein. It is *beyond*, perhaps just beyond, Dasein's understanding, and as such, beyond Dasein's power. Levinas will come to define this curious feature of signification as diachrony, and, more importantly, will come to understand, in a radically ethical way, the content of this "announcement" which puts the subject into question.

Given this "announced" world, Dasein feels secure, however, only by being "dispersed" among its own world of references and meaning, and thus moves to regain its security by having this newly announced world refer back to Dasein. It does this by having it "read" in a way as a matrix of Dasein's own possibilities. *Angst*, or anguish, as a mode of understanding, divulges meaning not within the simple *presence* of objects, but within their *future*, that is, within terms of their possibilities. Heidegger's term *Entwurf* or projection denotes this compulsion of Dasein to render meaning within an "index of futurity," or a coming into presence of possibilities (25). Dasein always moves "beyond the situation imposed," and as such, it is "always already beyond itself," "*au delà de soi-même*" (25). These original words of Levinas are striking in light of the title of one of Levinas's collections of Talmudic readings and lectures, L'au-delà du verset, or "beyond the verse." This work, he says, looks beyond the Scriptural verses because they have a "plain meaning" that is at the same time "enigmatic"; having, therefore, a diachronic structure of meaning, the Scriptures always point to a meaning that is ever still to come (Beyond the Verse x). But, once more, to regain its security, its centrality within the world, Dasein creates meaning in its world which continuously refers back to Dasein. In Levinasian terms, this is the mode of transcendence that is return of the Same to itself, the ontological "model" of the West.

When Levinas locates the essence of ontology in the act of discovering how beings are revealed, he points to the fact that within the scheme of understanding, the “principal event” of existence is the revelation of beings. Thus, the essence of these beings is the revelation of their essence (“Reflections on Phenomenological ‘Technique’” 97). Their essence is defined and fulfilled by the consciousness which reveals them within its world. More to the point, the manifestation of beings never comes as a founding event in terms of a new adventure or new experience by which one’s orientation to the world can become altered. As Levinas remarks, within the scheme of knowledge, an object is always a fact “already happened and passed through” (*Totality* 69). Underneath the acts of knowledge are those affective states which betray these acts not as the attempt to “record,” but the compulsion to “comprehend” (82). Knowledge makes use of itself as the mode by which Dasein comes to exert its power over that which may put it into question, or may jeopardize its freedom. Anxiety is felt not when the world is without meaning, but without the structures which lend themselves to its comprehension and authority. The dread felt when facing such indeterminacy comes precisely when it is revealed that the power of the subject can be put into question. Thematization allows for the ego to encounter itself once again and remain within the security of its world of meaning. Thematization is what is gained by the unity that Western philosophy imposes upon the objects coming before the theoretical subject, consisting of those “possibilities” they may hold for their encounter with that subject. That theme upon which all hinges, the theme of themes, is the supremacy of the Same.

Levinas noted very early on that one of Heidegger’s contributions was establishing the unity which philosophy had sought among essences or substances, among the structures of existence (“Martin Heidegger” 28). Such impulses derive from beings or “existents” becoming

in a way “reified” and therefore “accessible to the contemplation which seeks what is common to these different structures in order to identify” them with an underlying principle (28). The “Heideggerian mode of thinking,” which Levinas sought to praise and disseminate in his adopted country of France, saw that the attempt to achieve a “conceptual synthesis” failed to take into account the true nature of how these beings which were to become unified under knowledge are primarily revealed: in the concrete, lived experience of a Dasein (30). As such, they have an “essence” which the grasp of knowledge belies, an essence revealed not in the unity of reflection, given in the theoretical model of consciousness, but in the unity of solicitude or *Fürsorge*. Yet what Levinas reveals throughout his works after his movement away from Heidegger’s philosophy is that the construction of Being and Dasein had merely asserted the same structures of unity or totality that had previously dominated Western thought, clothing it not in the garments of theoretical knowledge but concrete experience.

For Levinas, the notion of Dasein which “Heidegger puts in place of the soul, consciousness, or the ego, retains the structure of the same” (“Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity” 51). Heidegger’s ontology distributes a “neuter” that “orders thought and beings,” giving the world a unity, yes, but also hardening the will “instead of making it ashamed” (52). The “moods” through which Being is revealed exposes this hardened will, showing its compulsion to recast alterity so that it reflects the Same. Heidegger noted this when he stated that the “bare mood” of Dasein “discloses the ‘there’ more primordially, but correspondingly it *closes it off* more stubbornly than any *not-perceiving* (Being and Time 175). The mode of transcendence can be seen not as a reaching outward but an enclosing within, an extension of identity to what comes to refute this identity (Totality 87). Power, which the subject yields to

maintain its distance from alterity, stands alongside freedom, which the subject maintains to force alterity to yield to its identity. “This imperialism of the same,” says Levinas, “is the whole essence of freedom” (Totality 87). These two aspects of totalization, power and freedom, are but two sides of a coin, the results of the *conatus essendi*, the desire a being has to preserve itself within its own being, an idea coming from Spinoza.

Levinas indicates as much when he emphasizes that for Heidegger, transcendence as “being-ahead-of-oneself signifies a relation not to an external object but to its own possibility of existing” (“Martin Heidegger” 30). Clarified here is just why Dasein always embarks on a *return* to the same rather than an *encounter* with the same. A return implies that the subject does take leave of itself, unlike that troubled transcendental ego of Husserl. So, Levinas does not deny Heidegger’s ability to indicate the true nature of transcendence; Levinas merely elucidates the content of such an encounter within Heidegger’s thought, and the affective state which creates such content, as the continual return to the same, and thus as the effacement of alterity within everyday hermeneutics.

Chapter Three

Reading: The Possibility of the Other

Phenomenology and the Possibility of the Other

Very early on, Levinas focused much of his critique of phenomenology on its slight account of how the subject encounters others. In the essay “Martin Heidegger and Ontology,” Levinas admits that his investigation, limited by Heidegger’s own work, has “not been able to insist on the character of *Dasein* by virtue of which it understands other persons, by virtue of which it coexists” (25). Illustrating that *Dasein* understands itself not in terms of its “true personality,” but in “terms of the objects it handles,” Levinas asserts that within Being and Time, *Dasein* “*is what it does*,” seeing itself “in virtue of the social role it professes” (“Martin Heidegger” 25). Levinas speaks to the notion that *Dasein*’s everyday existence is a “falling,” a life lived inauthentically, by noting that everyday understanding for *Dasein* emanates from the standpoint of “possibilities relating to tools” (25). The identities of tools, therefore, are a reconstitution of their being; *Dasein* accordingly lives among these inauthentic identities, existing socially, but among the faceless crowd of *das Man*, the “they,” which Levinas gives as either *l’on*, “the one,” or “*tout le monde*” (25). It would be incorrect to simply dismiss Heidegger’s notion of the “they” as merely his criticism of modernity and its homogenization of man. That criticism is there, and directs much of Heidegger’s commentary and analyses, but it is founded upon a necessary structure of *Dasein*’s everydayness, that of Being-ready-to-hand which makes up the identity of things. Heidegger shows that this modality of reference in essence recasts the world as one of function. In everyday life, even others are understood as one understands oneself, “in terms of things” (25). As “fallen,” *Dasein* loses itself in things and knows others only as instances

of things, reducing social relations to a context of things handled in common (25). The identities of others are thus reduced to the possibilities they hold for Dasein. As such, within the fallen state of inauthentic existence, others never come into their own authentic possibilities within Dasein's world.

Heidegger's notion of authentic existence, then, would seem to be a way out, an opening of transcendence by which the true encounter with the alterity can come about. If the layers of inauthenticity are peeled back, and objects, including others, can be seen within the same light they originally manifested, then the true form of transcendence can be presented to philosophical inspection and understanding. However, as Levinas shows through his sustained critique of philosophy, the fact that the encounter with others is made through the unity of *Sein* reveals ontology to be yet another instance of thematization, i.e., the casting of tools. Concepts, ideas, even "Being," reduce existents to a neuter state, allowing for their "handlability." "Heideggerian ontology," writes Levinas, "subordinates the relation with others" to a relation with a neuter, announcing only what is previously grasped and comprehended; as such, it "continues to exalt the will to power" ("Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity" 52). Exterior things come to surrender their identity through the generalization, domestication, and finally, possession that accompanies acts of reason (50). "Reason, which reduces the other," says Levinas, "is appropriation and power" (50).

Both Husserl and Heidegger account for the understanding of others by a sort of intersubjectivity or empathy. Husserl discusses how an ego can come to know another ego in the Fifth Meditation of his Cartesianische Meditationen. Quentin Lauer, well known for his explications of Husserlian phenomenology, admits that this account of intersubjectivity is perhaps the weakest element of Husserl's later works. Hemmed in by the logical necessities of having the laws of all subjectivity discovered within the transcendental ego, Husserl finds himself "obliged to find an

intentional category comprising some sort of experience of others' experiences," which he terms *Einfühlung* or "empathy" (Lauer 172). This category, Lauer notes, seems forced and created *ad hoc* (173). In this mode of intentionality, the other is given first as an object, then, as an objective correlate, its subjectivity is constituted through the perception of its behavior. It is comprehended as having the same experiences "I *would* have if I were *there*" (175). From the Fifth Meditation, it seems that Husserl is locked into the assumption that the essences of experiences cannot be modified except by the subject itself, and never by other subjects. This results in a subjectivity that is always independent of others, even while constituting them. If a subject has experiences, then to experience another subject is to experience it as having experiences, forming part of one's "intentional life" without ever having those experiences somehow coincide (Lauer 172). To do that, however, the other subject must be seen as an "alter ego," which is just how Husserl refers to this other within the Fifth Meditation. More properly, it is an "alter idem," for it is an instance of the Same, a modification of the ego's identity to comprehend the intentional object, i.e., the other. Husserl notes that the other becomes discovered through the "intentionalities, syntheses, [and] motivations" of my own experiences, in a word, becoming "mirrored in my own Ego" (Cartesianische Meditationen 94). While Husserl does admit that the other Ego "makes constitutionally possible a new infinite domain of what is 'other,'" anticipating Levinas's depiction of the face-to-face event as an opening upon infinity, he does so to show that the world is thus constituted as an "intersubjective sphere of ownness; a harmony of monads" (107). In harmony, these monads are but instances of the Same, constituting a totality.

In Being and Time, Heidegger's discussion of how Dasein encounters others undergoes a bit more rigorous deliberation, taking into consideration, of course, that the categorical mode of "Being-

with-others” is another mode of possibility for Dasein. Others are discussed right beside the discussion of tools, showing that Heidegger considered seeing another as a tool to be part of an inauthentic existence. Correctly, he states that the “kind of Being which belongs to the Dasein of Others, as we encounter it within-the-world, differs from readiness-to-hand and present-at-hand” (Being and Time 154). Despite this, Heidegger comes to regard the Dasein of others as “*like* the very Dasein which frees them,” referring to the notion that Dasein solicits things into existence or meaning through its everyday hermeneutics (154). “Thus in characterizing the encountering of Others,” writes Heidegger, “one is again oriented by that Dasein which is in each case one’s *own*” (154). Again, Heidegger does take into consideration the “deficient” mode of solicitation that reduces others to being mere bearers of references to Dasein itself; he notes that others are encountered “environmentally,” more “in terms of what is ready-to-hand within-the-world,” referring ostensibly to everyday “fallen” existence (156). But the other cannot escape the formulation of Being that Dasein initiates within its world. Even when a Dasein encounters another Dasein authentically, it is in terms of their both being bound by a common concern for Dasein; Heidegger refers to this as the “right kind of objectivity,” because it “frees the Other in his freedom for himself” (159). Just what mode of liberation is in play here does not matter as much as the notion that unity only occurs within the realm of ontology.

Heidegger anticipates Levinas in a sense by marking the modality of existence that is “Being-with” as Dasein “for the sake of Others,” denoting a structure to its being that furnishes its solicitude with respect to others (160). As “Being-with,” Heidegger writes, “Dasein ‘is’ essentially for the sake of Others” (160). We must accept this statement, however, as qualified, for its “Being-with” is but a shift in its modality. As Levinas shows, Dasein comes into itself only through the contingent

structures of existence, which harbor not specific others, nor even the Dasein of others. Instead, these structures are determined no farther than the terms “-with” or “-of.” They accommodate no being in particular, only Being in general, the world of Dasein writ large. For Levinas, this closely resembles the modality of “empathy” Husserl formulated to define the event of the other coming into consciousness.

Curiously, the objection to Husserl’s *Einfühlung* or “empathy” was voiced by Heidegger himself, who notes that this notion was supposed to provide “the first ontological bridge from one’s own subject . . . to the other subject,” but empathy, of course, becomes possible only on the grounds of a “Being-with” (162). Even further, Heidegger says that the “special hermeneutic of empathy” cannot account for just how

Being-with-one-another and Dasein’s knowing of itself are led astray and obstructed by the various possibilities of Being which Dasein itself possesses, so that a genuine ‘understanding’ gets suppressed, and Dasein takes refuge in substitutes. (163)

By noting that affectivity leads subjectivity “astray,” reference is made to the authentic mode of existing to which Heidegger believes Dasein as fallen becomes oblivious. A distinct note of anxiety underpins his discussion of the various modes of inauthentic existence which operate in Dasein’s life among others. Others as *das Man* stand as indefinite, dominating, even taking away the true identity of Dasein, disposing of its “everyday possibilities . . . as they please” (164). Being dispersed among them only increases their power (164). These others, Heidegger notes, are not “*definite* Others. On the contrary, any Other can represent them” (164).

All of this angst comes to its apogee in the concern Dasein, or at least Heidegger himself, has over an authentic existence, one that can be presented to the consciousness of Dasein and thus

known. Furthermore, others come into their own identity only through the opening which Being reveals to it, that is, as Dasein. In sum, Heidegger creates yet another instance of intersubjectivity, a “coexistence” that is a “we prior to the I and the other, a neutral intersubjectivity” (Totality 67-68). Others come to Dasein proximally, according to Heidegger, but only as an instance of a generalized idea, Dasein, or more to the point, possibilities of– and for–Dasein. Levinas locates this disposition of Being and Time within the overall predilection of philosophy to substitute ideas for persons (88). Reduced to concepts, things, especially the other person, are rendered inefficacious, diluted to instances of a neuter state (88). Others then come only through a matrix of impersonal order, affirming not their own identity but always the supremacy of the same. The possibilities which others may have for their own existence are recast as possibilities of the Same, precisely to defer any risk they may entail for the freedom and power of the subject which encounters them.

Ethics and the Structures of Transcendence

For Levinas, the Talmud admits its reader into a “mode of thought enamored of justice and peace” as opposed to one obsessed with its very own freedom and power (In the Time of the Nations 2). Within it and the existence forged for justice that it espouses comes the “desire for a peace that is no longer the repose of a self within itself, no longer mere autonomous self sufficiency” (2). Opposing the “well-known dialogue of the soul with itself,” it is an “anxious peace,” a “watchfulness awakened by the Torah” (2). The description “anxious” here is a deliberate reference to that anxiety that nothingness arouses within Dasein. Here, though, it is recast outside of totalization to define the anticipation of the possibilities within the original, and originary, structure of consciousness, “for-the-other.” This is the structure of consciousness, the existential mode, that Levinas defines throughout

his philosophical works, the one that makes all other modalities even possible. And, most importantly, this is the structure demanded of the readers of the Scriptures.

Very early on, Levinas saw that the proper account of the event of the other as it is revealed to consciousness could reorient the understanding philosophy has of the subject. He saw that it could lead to the proper model of transcendence that eluded philosophical thought since its beginnings. For it is “through the phenomenology of the other person,” he once wrote, there can be “a way to get outside the subject” (“Reflections on Phenomenological ‘Technique’” 109). Outside of the subject, he would be the initial instance of alterity, for he would be beyond the grasp of thematization, and thus outside the realm of the Same. Investigating his announcement to consciousness would determine how intentionality takes into its grasp something that can be outside of the subject. This “other” that Levinas takes up within his investigations differs from the “other” that philosophy usually displays, even within phenomenology. His is “the other of moral consciousness,” which he claimed in 1959 to have had “very bad press in phenomenology since Heidegger” (109). The other that would find its announcement to consciousness, not in knowledge but in ethics, would be, for Heidegger, *das Man*. Thus the other would prevent Dasein from coming into an authentic life by governing Dasein, intimidating Dasein’s own discoveries through the schema of morality, since *das Man* “prescribes the kind of being of everyday existence” (Being and Time 164). To live authentically, Dasein must understand its existence beyond the realm of good and evil. Only then, it seems, can it adhere to a morality that “uncovers” authentic Being properly, without the accumulated crust of inauthenticity.

Heidegger, however, reveals the limits of his analyses, at least within Being and Time, in that he correctly assumes a subject to be primarily aligned with its worldly existence not through knowledge but through its affective moods. What comes within Dasein’s grasp is “tempered,” one

can say, through its states-of-mind: *ethos* precedes *logos* within consciousness. Therein lies the capacity for illusion, disillusion, even judgment, since the fundamental structures of understanding are filled in not by knowledge but by the ego's subjective states or moods—things have meaning only in how they concern the subject. But Heidegger's attempt to illuminate the everyday hermeneutics of understanding, inasmuch as this understanding involves "concern" and "anxiety," determines things only after a subject has been constituted. Dasein, Levinas shows, is late in the game, coming into its existence not to understand it, but to affirm Dasein's own power and independence within it and over it— which already implicates Dasein in the act of self-reflection and self-knowledge. "The detour of ideality leads to a coinciding with oneself," Levinas writes, "to the certainty which remains the guide and guarantee of the whole spiritual adventure of Being" ("Substitution" 80). The affective states of Dasein are subordinated, as are all things, to ontology, the scheme wherein all significations divulge themselves as instances of a subject's possibility. Yet, what could have given the subject even the notion of "possibility," of "infinite possibility"? What could have preceded the self-constituted subject to announce to it its own identity? What could have issued, in a sense, the command that subjectivity obeys to continually announce its identity within its own understanding? Even further, what could have inaugurated the structures of existence if not that first instance of "structure" announced to the subject? Could this first instance of structure be that of transcendence itself? The answers lie in a comportment toward existence such as revealed by Levinas's works, especially the Talmudic readings. They, like his philosophy, are "radically opposed" to the ontology of Heidegger which "subordinates the relation with the Other" to itself, "rather than seeing in justice and injustice a primordial access to the Other" (*Totality* 89). This, then, would be a modality of existence wholly

aware of, and untroubled by, the fact that ethics precedes it, not as system or even agenda, but as affective orientation.

Being-for-the-Other

The Talmudic reading of Tractate Chullin 88b-89-a, asks if existence, if the “feverish activity which manifests and fills it,” is solely the “expression of a person” (“Who Is One-Self?” 112). Is existence always structured as it is within ontology, “quant-a-soi,” or “as-for-oneself”? This particular reading, as Levinas admits, looks to understand the notion of the “free man” of our modern lives in order to “distinguish the manner or mode—trace or promise—of the human ‘as-for-oneself,’ which risks losing itself under the imbroglio of blind forces, tendencies, and necessities” (113). Is this distance maintained at some great price? Are our lives “authentically” ours?

The Scripture cited by the Talmud here has Abraham, patriarch of nations, calling himself “dust and ashes” (Genesis 18:27). This was uttered, suggests Levinas, in the middle of thought turned toward “*l’autre absolument autre*,” or the other that is absolutely other (“Qui est soi-même?” 83). Levinas holds that this speaks of a “destitution which reveals glory” (114). Humility, obviously, is not foreign to religious texts, but Abraham’s is not a simple humility. The context, always important to the Talmud, for this statement is Abraham imploring the Lord to spare the lives of the righteous that are in the city of Sodom. Amazed at his audacity to speak before the Lord, he qualifies this act by noting “and yet I am but dust and ashes” (Genesis 18:27). As Levinas notes, this is a statement of self-denial, elevating the human to another condition, beyond “as-for-oneself,” remaining under the threat of his mortality as someone who thinks of the safekeeping of others” (“Who Is One-Self?” 114). Curiously, the Talmudic tractate here notes that Abraham was “rewarded” for this

utterance with two commandments granted to his grandchildren, the commandment of the “red heifer” and that of the “wives suspected of misconduct” (114). Both rituals deal with purification: the ashes of a red, never-yoked heifer being mixed with water to purify it for rituals, and certain wives suspected of misdeeds by their husbands having to consume temple water mixed with earth as a test of their purity, the guilty ones wasting away as a result of their impurity. Levinas reads this meaning in the statement from the Talmud:

Rituals as rewards! . . . [I]n the axiology of the Torah, the *mitzvah*, the divine commandment of the Law, [cannot be reduced] to an oppressive grip exerted upon the freedom of the faithful. It signifies, even in its constraining weight, all that the order of the unique God already provides for *participation in his reign*, for divine proximity and election, and for accession to the rank of the authentically human.
(emphasis added) (114-115)

“Rituals” denote here this participation that being turned from care for-oneself to care for-the-other. In this same chapter of Genesis, Abraham sits in his tent waiting, eagerly, to care for the other; three men travel by, and he runs out to give them rest and comfort. That this is the way the Lord reveals himself to Abraham, “by the oak of Mamre,” points to the fuller significance, as will be shown in the next chapter, that the other has for subjectivity, since it bears the full import of the simple act of transcendence.

For now, however, the structure of subjectivity which the Talmud insists upon, that of “for-the-other,” must be made clear by examining what it is not. Levinas refers to the Scriptures for a critique of subjectivity as it is constituted by Western thought. The subject, for the West, is being “inebriated by its own nature,” wholly “preoccupied with itself” (“The Will of God” 60, 65). Tellingly, philosophy in the West marks itself with the Socratic motto, “*gnothi seauton*” – “know thyself.” If it has “become the fundamental precept of all Western philosophy,” says Levinas, “this

is because ultimately the West discovers the universe within itself” (“Ethics and Spirit” 10). Where the Jewish model of subjectivity may come from Abraham in his tent, as Levinas has suggested, the West has its Odysseus, whose journey is but an adventure of a return (10). This subjectivity is that of Husserl and Heidegger also, for it is pure interiority and radical freedom. Occupying the center of its own existence, its possibilities are limited to instances of itself, persevering within its own being (“Ethics to Exegesis” 110). Praise for the Judaic texts comes from Levinas because they are “opposed to the idea that existence is a game,” standing contrary to the “metaphysical tendencies prevalent today, according to which being is play,” precisely because “one can exist only for himself” (“Judaism and Revolution” 107, 108, 112). Freedom for the West is not free enough, “because it drags along responsibilities” (107-08). But for the Scriptures, “being implies an extreme seriousness,” showing that “we are responsible beyond our commitments” (108). Our commitments, our responsibilities, are as infinite as our possibilities, because “It is not freedom which defines the human being. It is obedience which defines him” (“And God Created Woman” 166, 167).

An important element to the modality of existence espoused by the Talmudic texts is the notion of self-denial. More than just a gauge of moral fortitude and sacrifice, self-denial adumbrates *the* original and originary structure of consciousness preceding all others, making them in fact possible, that of “being-*for-the-other*.” This structure echoes the “Being-within-the-world” and “Being-with-others” that Heidegger reveals as part of Dasein’s everyday hermeneutics, which itself points to Husserl’s formulation of consciousness as always a consciousness *of* something. It is seen in Abraham’s calling himself “dust and ashes” in Genesis 18, which is significant in itself, but, as the Talmud records, these words also remind another commentator, referred to as Raba, of Abraham’s actions during the war in which he fought alongside the Canaanites, given in Genesis 14. According

to Levinas, one of the strengths of the Talmud is its determination that such cross-referencing deepens the sense of meaning and unity within the Scriptures. To return to Abraham, he states his refusal to take part in the plunder after the victory, being that he fought only to save his nephew Lot, saying that he will take nothing “from a thread to a sandal strap” as Levinas translates it (“Who Is One-Self?” 120). Such self-denial Levinas says “testifies to a new sense of the human inaugurated very early in Abraham’s life— this is the escalation of disinterestedness in a conflict, the very idea of the battle for the Good” (120). It should be noted that Levinas refers to this idea of disinterestedness or “*désintéressement*” throughout his works, secular and religious, given to denote this sense of subjectivity realizing not possibilities for-itself but for-the-other.

The model of self-denial that Levinas focuses on within the Talmud has its strongest statement in the Talmudic reading “The Youth of Israel,” which looks at the tractate *Nazir*, 66a and 66b. This section of the Talmud discusses the nazirite, described in chapter 6 of the Book of Numbers. Singled out as one who does not cut his hair, the nazirite “wears” the “glory of his God” upon his head (121). Levinas, of course, reads deeper, saying that he is “convinced” that the “glory of God” on the nazirite’s head actually expresses “a demand for justice” in the heart of the nazirite (121). Other prohibitions for the nazirite include abstaining from wine or any product of grapes and from impure contact, such as with a dead body. Death, as Levinas points out, is a particularly strong proscription in Judaism, calling it the “grandfather of impurity,” but not one referencing the “realm of the sacred and profane” (123). Instead, death is impurity because “it threatens to take away all meaning from life”; through death “all meaning immediately risks being reduced to absurdity” (123). Levinas suggests that regarding death leads to contemplation of one’s own mortality, instilling the “race to enjoy the moment, the *carpe diem*,” which is but an indulgence in the self (123). As for the wine,

Levinas points out that it is prohibited because

Drunkenness is illusion, the disappearance of the problem, the end of responsibility, an artificial enthusiasm, and the nazirite does not wish to be deceived, or to be relieved of the weight of existence by forgetting Evil and misfortune. (123)

The long hair, he adds, also defeats any sense of self-regard; it is “Anti-narcissism” for it is “a way of being, ‘without a mirror’: to be, without turning toward oneself” (124).

Illuminating this notion of the nazirite further, Levinas holds it up as the ideal of disinterestedness which is “opposed to the *essence* of a being,” reiterating again what the Judaic texts hold forth as the concept of subjectivity by illustrating what it is not. It is not the essence that “is precisely always persistence in essence, the return of essence upon itself, self-consciousness and complacency in self” (127). By disavowing the care for himself, the nazirite rejects “not being beautiful but looking at oneself being beautiful,” and in so doing rejecting also “the narcissism which is self-consciousness, upon which our Western philosophy and morality are built” (127). Ultimately, the nazirite reveals the Talmudic subject as one rejecting “thought thinking itself” (127).

Narcissus serves well as the model of Western subjectivity, and the foil for the nazirite, but only to a point. He does come to perceive only himself, and by doing this he does alienate himself from the universe as a whole, closing himself off in a type of circularity that exposes only his affective state, which is a desire more than an anxiety, a desire for the self. But if Narcissus was swept away by his own beauty, Western man is tempted by something even more commanding, even more seductive.

Salvation, Sorcery, and the Western Subject

Though the two may appear to be at odds for most, Levinas considered Western philosophy and Christianity to be quite similar in their individualistic, ego-centered approach to existing within the world. Additionally, both seek “salvation” within existence by obtaining and maintaining freedom from this world. One gets the sense from his more informal writings, such as in Difficile liberté, that for Levinas, Christianity and philosophy in the West parallel each other’s history, in that each moved from the strict adherence to dogma and tradition in the middle ages, toward a focus on individual vision and validation, the defining quality of the Enlightenment. Here, Protestantism and Cartesianism may best symbolize that turn to a new role for subjectivity, one with the power and responsibility to obtain meaning and salvation from within itself. In an essay titled “Being a Westerner,” Levinas recalls the insights of Léon Brunschvicg, who showed in his work De la Vraie et de la Fausse Conversion, suivi de la Querelle de l’Atheisme, that the West teaches that “a spiritual life should be one devoid of egoism,” an egoism which is “*a striving for salvation*” (47). Brunschvicg reveals that the obsession with salvation emanates from self-love, “a trace of natural egoism from which we must be torn by the religious life” (qtd. in “Being a Westerner” 48). Salvation, as Brunschvicg says here, is for the one who disregards God as he is and instead uses God “for his own ends” (qtd. in “Being a Westerner” 48). Levinas adds to this assertion, saying that “the concern for salvation, even when it raises itself above immediate needs and seeks only to triumph over death, still stems from biological *self*; the biological self cannot dispense with mythology and war” (48). Brunschvicg’s critique of the West appealed to Levinas because it pointed to elements from a more distant time still working to this day, such as the “irrationalists of the present day” who managed to dispose of “the old concepts and then immediately set about adoring their shadow” (qtd. in “Being a Westerner” 48).

Levinas doesn't just focus his criticism against the idea of personal salvation on Christianity, however; at times he uses his criticism to take on more contemporary ideas of religion, as when he distinguishes the traditional God of the Torah from the more modern concept of God, the latter being one who "dished out prizes, inflicted punishments or pardoned sins— a God who, in his goodness, treated men like children" ("Loving the Torah more than God" 143). These words are given in a discussion of a fictionalized account of the Warsaw Ghetto resistance, published in an Israeli journal and told from the perspective of a character named Yossel ben Yossel. Yossel rages against the "God who hides His face," which for Levinas shows the only rational response to his situation, for the "adult's God is revealed precisely through the void of the child's heaven" (143). No consolation of the divine is afforded to Yossel, at least not through "infantile religious feeling," for the "individual can prevail only through his conscience, which necessarily involves suffering" (143). Levinas continues by asking,

But with what lesser demon or strange magician have you therefore filled your heaven, you who claim that it is empty? And why, under an empty sky, do you continue to hope for a good and sensible world? (143)

The God who hides his face, Levinas concludes, is the one who "appeals instead to the full maturity of the responsible man" (143). The ethical element of Judaism is affirmed for Levinas when Yossel proclaims that he loves God, but he loves His Torah even more, pointing to this same realm of ethics and responsibility in which the divine makes its presence felt (144). For Levinas, Judaism is a "religion for adults," as the title of one of his essays suggests, precisely because it

appeals to a humanity devoid of myths— not because the marvellous is repugnant to its narrow soul but because myth, albeit sublime, introduces into the soul that troubled element, that impure element of magic and sorcery and that drunkenness of the Sacred and of war that prolong the animal within the civilized. (48)

The words “magic and sorcery” here are not to be taken lightly, for they represent within Levinas yet another instance of the power and freedom of subjectivity which the Talmud opposes. One of his Talmudic readings, “Desacralization and Disenchantment,” features an in-depth discussion of “sorcery,” which for Levinas represents not only any affront to the concept of the holy, but also the modern world and the central role that the Western model of subjectivity plays within its indiscretions. This particular Talmudic reading begins with Levinas distinguishing between what is sacred and what is holy. Holiness for Levinas denotes “separation or purity, the essence without admixture that can be called Spirit” (“Desacralization” 141). This idea of holiness as separation, diachronic and therefore infinite separation, becomes important in his discussions of infinity, both within the Talmudic readings and within his philosophy as a whole. Sacredness, then, would be the illusion of the holy, an impure essence ascribed to holiness. Sacredness and sorcery are akin, the latter being “the mistress of appearance” (141). The sacred, as it is given by Levinas here very briefly, does not seem that distant from sorcery. Truly, the sacred is “the half light in which the sorcery the Jewish tradition abhors flourishes,” for it is that “other side” of things given before us, the “reverse or obverse of the Real, Nothingness condensed to Mystery, bubbles of Nothing in things” (141). Here, Levinas references the quotation from Macbeth he used to preface this reading, the words of Banquo as he and Macbeth see the three witches that they were talking to disappear before them: “The earth hath bubbles, as the water has, / And these are of them” (1.3.79). Like a bubble, sorcery appears to be of substance, but it is illusion, intangible and fleeting. What does the sacred have to do with sorcery in this sense? In short, Levinas suggests that designating something as sacred is to assign its meaning as a “mystery,” which is but a refusal to read meaning here within the present as well as within the future. This understanding of the idea of “mystery” prevents it from being confused

with the notion of “enigma,” discussed in the next chapter on infinity, which briefly is the feature of meaning to consistently elude the grasp of totality. In terms of diachrony, meaning within mystery or the sacred is never to come into the concrete world of experience. The sacred, Levinas writes, “adorns itself with the prestige of prestiges,” but “revelation,” that act of welcoming meaning which the Talmud presents as the primary modality of subjectivity, “refuses these bad secrets” (“Desacralization” 141).

Sorcery within the Talmud, as Levinas shows, reveals itself to be the presumption of the ego, a metaphor for grasping its continual attempt to assert power over its world. If the sacred can be the arbitrary constitution of limits and definition, even at the expense of ethical responsibilities, sorcery is the audacity of claiming to be within the inner sanctum of those sacred mysteries. In the Gemara which this particular reading takes up, a Rabbi Akiba notes the similarity of the expression “you shall not let the sorceress live” from Exodus 22: 18, to that of Exodus 19: 13, which says “Man or beast must be stoned; they shall cease to live” (144). Such comparison is quite common to the Talmud, for as Levinas points out, it reinforces the sense of unity among the Scriptures, and illustrates the depths of meaning within a verse, or a word even, by its continual application to other elements of the texts. Rabbi Akiba calls up the context of Exodus 19, where the Lord commands Moses to warn the Israelites not to approach Mt. Sinai, the site of the Revelation of God’s commandments, until permitted, not even to its border—those who presume to do so shall be stoned to death. Here, the “comparison of texts is instructive,” for it shows that sorcery is not “a foreign phenomenon,” a paganism or polytheism against which Judaism must guard itself, but in fact “the temptation of the people called to the Revelation” (144, 144-45). Levinas explains:

Sorcery is the fact of looking beyond what it is possible to see. It is to go beyond the limits within which one must stay when truth approaches, not to stop in time. It is the servants who see more than their mistresses. I am alluding here to a Midrash in which the servant is proud to have seen the king, while the princess . . . had closed her eyes—but she had been much closer to the majesty of the king by this non-looking than had the servant who looked. Sorcery is the curiosity which manifests itself when the eyes should be cast down: indiscretion regarding the Divine; insensitivity to Mystery; clarity projected unto something the approach to which requires some modesty. (145)

Levinas suggests for this last definition the examples of “certain forms of Freudianism,” “certain claims of sexual education which show little concern for the unprecedented language such an education requires,” “forms of the sexual life,” and the “claims of ‘science for everyone’” (145). Judging these examples to be reactionary or anti-modern on Levinas’s part, which is sure to be the charge by some whenever religious texts are presented, is not as important as understanding that these things are presented as the manifestations of modernity’s demand that all limits be done away with, often in the name of an individual’s freedom and power. According to Levinas, Rabbi Akiba sees sorcery not as “pagan perversion,” but as “a perversion of the holy people [the Israelites] itself,” for it results not from “bad influences” but from

the excess of knowledge itself, that which is beyond what can be borne in truth, the illusion which derives from the unbearable truth and which tempts from the very depths of the truth . . . the perversion of all those able to rise to the true. (145)

Being neither perversity nor “unbridled curiosity,” sorcery “results from vice” (145).

Levinas leads this reading up to the “philosophical problem”: “How is degradation possible? How can holiness be confused with the sacred and turn into sorcery?” (146). Furthermore, how is it that the sacred beguiles, with its “power over human beings”? (147). At this point, Levinas refers to a technique that only the Talmud could be secure enough to allow: Rabbi Johanan, in the Gemara accompanying the Mishna featured in this Talmudic reading, remarks that sorcery is called

“keshafim,” or **כֶּשָׁפִים**, because “it challenges the Assembly on High,” a phrase containing the letters **כ**, **פ**, **ש**, and **נ** within it, which form the word “keshafim” (137, 147). “A comparison,” says Levinas, “which no serious etymology could justify,” but he is intrigued by the idea that “the meaning of sorcery would be to challenge the highest order . . . the diabolical Luciferian *no*” (147). Sorcery would therefore be a transgression of limits, or a refusal to acknowledge limits, which is the “desacralization of the sacred,” of the truly sacred (for Levinas does *reserve* the title rather than wholly dismiss it), and not that which appears as the sacred (147).

The ambiguity of this term sacred here must be addressed. Like “mystery,” which can mean the “bubbles of Nothing in things,” or the truly enigmatic and holy, the meaning of the sacred within this Talmudic reading shares the distinction of terminology throughout all of Levinas’s works (141). Words have meaning only within context of other words; calling upon the hermeneutics discussed earlier, words as signs are necessary for the meaning of other things to become present. As Levinas writes of the Talmud, specifically its desire to understand word and verse in the Scriptures by other words and verses, “context . . . restores the Torah,” promoting “vigilance” and “wakefulness of thought” (“Beyond the State in the State” 100). This is true even for subjectivity. The structure of meaning within Levinas’s works is always referential, always a “welcoming” of transcendence by creating the “dwelling” within which it can exist within its own identity. Therefore, reading Levinas in a sense requires not a handbook of philosophical definitions, or a solid grasp of abstract terms, but an openness toward the multiple meanings and elucidations that the experience of the concrete demands. Such “possibilities” of the concrete within experience, within “the Real,” to borrow from Levinas, explain the event of the face of the other— the meaning of the other is only had through the welcoming that it demands. This “referential” use of words initiates criticism, to be sure, as with

Dermot Moran, who seems more than impatient with Levinas's "contradictory assertions" (Moran 352). What it discloses, in fact, is a penetrating consistency in Levinas's thought: he understands hermeneutics to be the primary structure of subjectivity, so every modality of the subject betrays itself as the act of "reading."

To conclude the discussion of sorcery, Levinas says that "the nothingness of sorcery inserts itself into the Real," which he shows to be another way of saying that in fact, sorcery is "the magic" of "interiorization" (148, 149). He writes that "all is allowed in the inner life, all is allowed, including crime" (149). No surprise to find that Levinas was a longtime reader of Russian novels, especially Dostoevsky, whose characters Raskolnikov and the "Underground" man surely could be expected to say that "all is allowed in the inner life . . . including crime," but with a sense of triumph and righteousness (149). Within the realm of interiorization, nothing remains "identical to itself any longer" (152). For Levinas,

That is what sorcery is: the modern world; nothing is identical to itself; no one is identical to himself; nothing gets said for no word has its own meaning; all speech is a magical whisper; no one listens to what you say; everyone suspects behind your words a not-said, a conditioning, an ideology. (152)

Opposing this interiority, the tractate featured in "Desacralization and Disenchantment" ends with Rabbi Eliezer near death; his companions come to him not for consolation or comfort, but for one more lesson on the rituals which make up a substantial part of the Talmud. They ask, "What is the law of a ball, a shoemaker's last, an amulet, a leather bag containing pearls, and a small weight?" The Talmud's "attachment to questions of the ritual 'to do' and 'not to do,' testifies," for Levinas, "to a greatness that is precisely what brings incomprehension and scorn upon the Jewish tradition" (156-157). Levinas emphasizes that the apparently inappropriate and untimely in reality characterizes the

truly important things for a spiritual, ethical life— for what is talked about around the dying rabbi? “Eternal destiny? The inner life? Not at all,” says Levinas (157). The determination of “‘what I must do’ is more important than ‘what I am allowed to hope for’” (157). The articles mentioned are made of leather, and can be “considered receptacles and non-receptacles(157). As objects of leather, they can become impure by being in the presence of the dead, and the sages gathered around him want to obtain one more sliver of knowledge before he goes (157). Levinas says of this section of the tractate that “it is quite a remarkable structuralist analysis” (157). For the ball, the leather is the container; the leather in the pouch of pearls allows things to be suspended; the small weight is protected by the leather; and finally, the shoemaker’s last is covered by leather, not made of leather (157). All of them, says Rabbi Eliezer, become impure and must enter into purification (158). Such analysis “indicates a curiosity about formal meaning in the Rabbi’s casuistry,” but more importantly, it shows “precisely what purity is. The care given not to the unfathomable purity of my intentions, but to the objective rules of purity” (158). Altogether, it shows the orientation of subjectivity within Judaism is not to interiority, but to exteriority, to the concrete presence of existence itself and not some “inner world.” It shows what Levinas means when he notes that Judaism represents “an irreducible modality of being present to the world” (153). Being present as such means being opened onto exteriority; closing oneself off in essence negates the possibilities of discourse with alterity. As Levinas says of the Talmud, noting that it lives not solely off of tradition, but off of discourse among the members of the Jewish community, among the sages of the past and the present, and even among the Laws and those who would enforce them: Levinas remarks that the “total interiorization of the Laws is nothing but its abolition (“As Old as the World?” 83). A subjectivity withdrawn into itself is within the “most intimate intimacy of Being,” which is but to be “thrown into the shoreless abysses of interiority”

(“And God Created Woman” 177). Judaism counters that with a “humanity,” or a universality, that signals “the end of interiority, the end of the subject” (167).

Temptation and Opposition

In the West, however, interiority signifies freedom. The Calvinist, for example, separated himself from this world and its consequences by handing his interior life over to God. Philosophers like Descartes retreated within the realm of the mind to show that there, existence was rock solid. Interiority is spiritual life; once nurtured, it is redemption. Prior to that freedom and enjoyment, however, Levinas shows that interiority begins with the modality of opposition and solitude.

In the Talmudic reading “Beyond the State in the State,” Levinas looks at the tractate Tamid 31b-32b, where Alexander the Great comes to Talmudic sages to pose questions to them. Bordering on interrogation, Alexander asks them to answer questions regarding the creation of the world, whether darkness or light came first, and so on. When he asks about the darkness and the light, the sages, though patiently answering all of the questions, suddenly fall silent, fearing that Alexander would attempt to ask “what is above and what is below, what is interior, what is exterior” (“Beyond the State” 80). Levinas notes that the sages display hesitation “regarding the non-initiated who interrogates,” but also says that they stop short of indulging Alexander’s “indolent curiosity” (89). Also echoing here is Levinas’s criticism of sorcery earlier, as the lack of restraint and respect, and the demand for knowledge.

Criticism of such a demand for knowledge comes through in Levinas’s explanation as to how the Torah can be made impure by hands. “They are declared impure because they touch everything,” he assures us, “indeed nothing is more mobile, more impertinent, more restless than the hand” (“For

a Place in the Bible” 23-24). The Scriptures are made impure because they are “touched by the impatient, busy hand that is supposedly objective and scientific” (24). Such handling, such grasping, if that phenomenological term can be given yet another meaning here, is a “directness” which “strips and impoverishes the Scriptures,” cutting them off in a sense “from the breath that lives within them” (24). The hand is just a hand in ritual, of course, but it is also the concrete realization of that “impudence of spirit that seizes a text savagely, without preparation or teacher” (24). Elsewhere, Levinas proclaims, “Woe to the self-taught!” (“Toward the Other” 24).

Impatient with the sages answers, or lack thereof, Alexander the Great demands of them, “Why do you oppose us?”, using the royal “we,” of course, but also giving words to the question that Western subjectivity has demanded of its world since the beginnings of philosophy (“Beyond the State” 81). The sages reply simply that “Satan is a conqueror” (81). Levinas explains that Satan is “ambiguity itself,” that which “separates thoughts from the cultural context they invoke and from which they come, and mixes ideas” (100). Alexander audaciously commands the sages to give him something, since he is “an important man!” (82). Their “gift” sums up the argument against the subject which demands knowledge and answers that suit him; they give to Alexander a human eyeball, because it “is never satisfied” (82). Levinas says that this eyeball brings the tractate back to the initial questions of Alexander, which wanted to look beyond the horizons, beyond the limits of heaven and existence itself. Alexander’s is the look “beyond which no one can go, which goes from the Orient to the Occident, with that look which forever sees more of the graspable than the paradisaical dreams of those who look toward the height [of heaven]” (105).

Looking beyond those limits only reveals an extension of interiority, a “detour of ideality” as Levinas refers to it, a “coinciding with oneself” that becomes the “guide and guarantee of the whole

spiritual adventure of Being” (“Substitution” 80). Such an adventure, Levinas assures us, is “not exactly an adventure. It is never dangerous. It is always a self-possession, sovereignty, *arche*,” disclosing only what is already disclosed, “cast in the mold of the *known*” (80). “For the Western philosophical tradition,” he adds, “all spirituality is consciousness, the thematic exposition of Being, that is, knowledge” (80). Levinas comes to call this “adventure,” or at least the desire for such spiritual adventure, the temptation of temptation. In the Talmudic reading titled “The Temptation of Temptation,” focusing on a small portion of the Tractate *Shabbath*, Levinas asserts that “the temptation of temptation may well describe the condition of Western man” (32). First, it denotes his “moral attitudes,” for Western man is “for an open life, eager to try everything, to experience everything,” and certainly resigned not to have life simply pass him by (32-33). He resolves not to stand within a state of innocence, seeing such a state “purely negatively as a lack” (33). Christianity as such is the paradigm of the temptation of temptation, for it “proclaims a dramatic life and struggle with the tempter,” but there is within it also “an affinity with this intimate enemy” (33). To “travel the universe,” to “traverse the whole to touch the depth of being, is to awaken the ambiguity coiled inside” that depth (33). Like Odysseus tied to the mast of his ship, Western man longs for the “song of the siren” without the dangers of the rocks upon which he would sink (33). Temptation allows for such a journey, for it can “brush past evil, know it without succumbing to it, experience it without experiencing it, try it without living it” (33). It remains pure in the “midst of total compromise” (33). In short, “the temptation of temptation is the temptation of knowledge” (33).

Levinas elicits this judgment of the West from a Talmudic excerpt that discusses the Israelites at the foot of Mount Sinai, specifically Exodus 19:17, which Levinas shortens to “And they stopped at the foot of the mountain” (30). This verse shows understanding of limits, to be sure, but more

importantly it shows that within the context of the acceptance of the covenant with God. Levinas makes much use of the fact that, as Rav Simai says in this tractate, the “Israelites committed themselves to *doing* before *hearing*,” (30). An acceptance which is doing before hearing, a commitment to the ethical laws of the Torah before they are heard and understood, contrasts the freedom and security that the Ego in the West demands (34). The covenant requires participation and forbearance; the West demands freedom alongside complete participation (34). But such freedom is “a temporary situation, an illusory ideal” (34).

Levinas goes on to declare that “the temptation of temptation is philosophy,” especially given that within it, “the ego,” one could say the *transcendental* ego, “remains independent,” yet never removed “from what must consume it,” that is, the world (34). In the middle of “engagement,” the ego asserts “a continual disengagement” (34). To do that is to “remain beyond good and evil,” without ever “sinking into evil” (34). It is to experience the world without committing yourself to it (34). “We want to live dangerously,” says Levinas, “but in security, in the world of truths” (34). Philosophy is redefined by Levinas along these lines, as “the subordination of any act to the knowledge that one may have of that act, knowledge being precisely this merciless demand to bypass nothing” (35). He adds that “the priority of knowledge is the temptation of temptation” (35). In the West, Levinas writes, we require “a knowledge completely tested through our own evidence” (34).

This grasping at an arm’s distance, this simultaneous approach and escape, is revealed to be the injustice that it is once it “engages” the other. This act of knowledge “will no longer leave the other in its otherness but will always include it in the whole” (35). “From this stems the inability to recognize the other person as other person,” according to Levinas, other as “out side all calculation, as neighbor, as first come” (35). For Levinas, the other “marks the end of my powers” (*Totality* 87).

The freedom of the ego is exposed as “arbitrary” in the light of the other; the freedom of the other “is a superiority that comes from his very transcendence” (“A Religion for Adults” 17; Totality 87). The end of the ego’s powers are indicated by its inability to account for the event of the other, to place it within the context of its own experiences, for “he overflows absolutely every *idea* I can have of him” (Totality 87).

Opposed to this “temptation” of the ego, and to the injustice that such temptation requires, are the Scriptures, as well as the Israelites themselves, whose freedom from slavery in Egypt transforms at Mount Sinai into “the freedom of the Law, engraved in stone, . . . a freedom of responsibilities” (“Temptation” 37). What this illustrates for Levinas here is the “difficult freedom of being Jewish” (37). Even further, it shows the paradigm for understanding the subject as “obligated” before it can ever “freely” choose—its freedom is superseded by what precedes it. “That which must be received in order to make freedom of choice possible,” says Levinas, “cannot have been chosen, unless after the fact” (37). Reason, the capacity for being present to truth as it is revealed, and for initiating the realm of meaning, is necessarily conditioned by revelation (37). Interiority must have been shattered for the subject to comprehend the basic structure of transcendence; the other must have revealed himself as totally other for there to be any grasping of alterity, of distance, in fact, of meaning itself, which is but the subject’s ability to traverse distances through understanding. As that which initiates meaning, the other “gives” the possibility of subjectivity to the ego, by revealing the ego’s existence as necessary for the other’s revelation. Consciousness, therefore, and the structure of language by which it abides are gifts from the other. Better still, they are the concrete textures of the obligation, the debt, to the other. Necessarily, the subject must configure signs and referents within his world for meaning to appear, like the “being-

with” structures of Dasein that Heidegger investigated. Levinas shows, however, that the primary structure of subjectivity is “for-the-other”; it conditions all other structures, making them possible. All elements of meaning, structured as “for-the-other,” thus make the subject “hostage” to the other, a term Levinas uses, in both his secular and religious writings, to denote this obligation before even the constitution of choice and freedom. We are not free in this world, he says, “not free in the presence of others and simply their witnesses. We are their hostages,” adding that this is a notion “through which, beyond freedom, the self is defined” (“As Old as the World?” 37). The subject, its “I think,” is never a “self-generated act,” but “sociality” itself (“Contempt for the Torah as Idolatry” 66). By that sociality which he freely makes his own, man is given over to the elements of his existence, “the hostage of the universe,” designating at once “extraordinary dignity” with “unlimited responsibility” (“And God Created Woman” 171). The realization of these obligations comes through in the very act of reading the Torah, with its defense of upright subjectivity and its illumination of the spiritual life as one oriented to exteriority, to alterity. Within the Torah, “Being has a meaning,” which is “to realize the Torah . . . The act by which the Israelites accept the Torah is the act which gives meaning to reality. To refuse the Torah is to bring being back to nothingness” (“Temptation” 41).

Chapter Four

Infinity: Beyond Being, Beyond the Text

The Challenge of an Ontological Reversal

Parole de Dieu, parler à Dieu, parler de Dieu et de la parole de Dieu—Sainte Ecriture, prière, théologie—, les multiples figures du langage religieux ont en commun la prétention de ne pas s'épuiser en références au monde don't se tisserait la signification des mots, des propositions et des discours. Comment ouvrir au langage les frontières de la réalité donnée où nous habitons? ("Du langage religieux" 107).

In the Talmudic reading excerpted above, Levinas asserts that what the multiple expressions of God have in common, be they scripture, prayer, or theology, is the claim of inexhaustibility with reference to a world from which signification is "woven." A world, that is, of words, propositions and discourse. In short, religious language testifies to the inexhaustibility of meaning which comes to signification as though from beyond the horizons of meaning. God, then, comes to be more than divine presence; it comes to stand for the very possibility of signification, transcendence, and discourse, or anything in which meaning can take place. The word "God," then, can be understood more clearly by the term "Infinity," which Levinas uses more consistently and precisely throughout his works. The two words, "God" and "Infinity," express the same concept, which comes to be not only the major player within the drama of signification, but the very author and stage which makes such an event possible. For the sake of analysis, the two should be seen as separate, although Levinas constantly works toward having them both become the very same foundation which makes the realm of the human and the realm of language possible. In fact, these two realms for Levinas represent unique significations of the very same event. Again, for the sake of the explanation at hand, the two terms God and Infinity shall remain separate, but always parallel, as though they were two sides of

the very same coin. For in the end, "Infinity" will come to be the term by which alterity is understood in its most fundamental essence, and "God" will more clearly be seen as the conceptualization of the ethical commandment which the event of alterity announces. God and Infinity, as we shall see, are both important for tracing out the hermeneutics Levinas initiates to illuminate within the Talmud those "structures or modalities of a spiritual . . . hidden beneath consciousness . . . already invested in the world, and hence absorbed in it" ("From Ethics to Exegesis" 109). Again, it is a hermeneutics operating as a "phenomenology attentive to the horizons of consciousness . . . a phenomenology prior to a theology." (109). Furthermore, the concept of infinity constitutes not just the act of reading itself, but as will be shown, the significance of the traditional method of reading the Talmud, the Torah, or even Jewish tradition. Infinity characterizes the relationship of man to God, and therefore, of man to man, for it is no longer an impersonal, abstract idea for Levinas, but the very singling out of consciousness on the interpersonal level, defining Levinas's interpretation of the meaning of Jews as a chosen people. This election denotes not a sense of pride, but ethical responsibility. As such, the very freedom of the subject within its identity or its totality is displaced, paralleling the exile within the "Holyhistory" as Levinas puts it, of the nation of Israel. Levinas writes that the very "fact of Israel, its Scriptures and their interpretations . . . constitute a *figure* in which a primordial mode of the human is revealed, in which, before any theology and outside any mythology, God comes to the mind." (110). Thus Judaism, which he states is a "mode of being," is brought forward within the Talmudic readings to confront philosophy with "the challenge of an ontological reversal" (110).

Descartes and the Infinite

The elucidation of the concept of infinity within the works of Levinas, and thus within his Talmudic hermeneutic, begins with its more phenomenological structure. From there the concept moves beyond the philosophical works to become central to Levinas's understanding of the act of reading that he discusses within his Talmudic readings, as well as to the very surplus of meaning that the Talmud bears within itself. Understanding both the philosophical and the hermeneutical use of the term infinity by Levinas requires an understanding of the term as given in the works of Descartes. One of Levinas's earliest works, done with his former teacher Gabrielle Peiffer, is a translation into French of Husserl's Cartesianische Meditationen, a work Levinas referred to continually when discussing the significance of Husserl's philosophy to a predominantly French audience. Though it could be argued that Levinas's motive in this translation was to appeal to France's national and perhaps more native predilections for certain philosophers, it could equally be true that Levinas hoped to connect phenomenology to philosophy's modern foundations. In his essay "The Work of Edmund Husserl," Levinas claims that in the Cartesianische Meditationen, Husserl shows how "phenomenology is close to Cartesianism," especially in its attempt to discover within consciousness the very foundations for absolute knowledge (81). Both philosophical schools, says Levinas, proudly focus on the doubt plaguing philosophy in particular and knowledge in general, making it the "fundamental motive" that induces us to suspend every judgment bearing on the world, "until a solid basis for judgment could be had" (81). Levinas states, however, that "only the first two of Descartes's meditations count for phenomenology" (81). The reason for this restriction comes through in Descartes's own subjects for these meditations, on things that may be doubted and the nature of the human mind, respectively. These subjects are of course central to the objectives of both Descartes

and Husserl. The third meditation comes to contemplate the existence of God, and it is at this point that Descartes, as well as Levinas himself, comes to break away from and go beyond the line of thought that phenomenology pursues. Both thinkers go beyond the horizon of meaning revealed within subject-object relationships to pursue the significance of the very act of signification itself. Though Levinas follows Descartes in going beyond the horizons of consciousness, beyond the horizons of meaning as presence, in yet another discussion of Husserl's affinity with Cartesianism, Levinas shows that Husserl had some recognition of this "something" beyond the given within consciousness. Levinas quotes Husserl who says that "cogito as consciousness" is "'the meaning of the thing' it intends," adding that the meaning "*exceeds*, at each instant, that which at that very instant, is given as 'explicitly intended.'" (qtd. in "The Ruin of Representation" 115). The exceeding of meaning means that it is "laden with a 'more' that stretches beyond . . . *This exceeding of the intention of the intention itself*, which is inherent in all consciousness, must be considered as essential [*Wesensmoment*] to that consciousness" (115). Elsewhere Levinas notes that "the presence of the subject to transcendent things is the very definition of consciousness" (114). Just as he does throughout most of his writings, Levinas will take this phenomenological "groundwork" and make of it his own. He will take this phenomenological definition of consciousness and go beyond the mere act of transcendence within consciousness to show that the very first signification, in fact the event that makes consciousness, transcendence, signification, even language itself possible, is the subject's encounter with the idea of infinity.

In a certain sense Descartes asserts the very same foundational role to the idea of infinity, claiming that the ideas, say, of heat, of objective existence, what have you, must have been placed within him, for "these ideas do not depend on my will nor therefore on myself—for they often present

themselves to my mind in spite of my will (Meditations 151). This confession of consciousness being subject to something from the outside is a confession that

if the objective reality of any one of my ideas is of such a nature as clearly to make me recognise that it is not in me either formally or eminently, and that consequently I cannot myself be the cause of it, it follows of necessity that I am not alone in the world, but that there is another being which exists, or which is the cause of the idea.
(154)

Even further, Descartes writes, "had no such an idea existed in me, I should have had no sufficient argument to convince me of the existence of any being beyond myself," adding that "I have made very careful investigation everywhere and up to the present time have been able to find no other ground" (154). Descartes comes to conclude that this being could only be God, in that the power to introduce ideas within consciousness before consciousness could detect them is a power outside the realm of common, finite beings. The conclusions are that such a being could only be termed infinite, since it does not seem to insert itself within the horizons of consciousness after the fact, that is, after time, will, thought, or even consciousness itself has been constituted for the subject. Descartes, however, does not give this definition of the infinite, but only implies it by asserting that only God could be the being with such power over the subject. He says, "by the name God I understand a substance that is infinite, eternal, immutable, independent, all-knowing, all-powerful, and by which I myself and everything else . . . have been created" (156). "The more diligently I attend" to these characteristics, Descartes adds, "the less do they appear capable of proceeding from me alone"; thus, he concludes, "God necessarily exists" (156).

It is Descartes's conception of infinity given in his Meditations on First Philosophy that is admitted by Levinas to be the foundation for his own understanding of the idea of infinity. In fact, Levinas admits that the Third Meditation, where Descartes discusses the true grounds for knowing

God's existence, is "a text I have always exploited" ("Transcendence and Height" 25). As can be seen here, infinity in this third meditation displaces the centrality of the subject within his own consciousness, a "de-centering" if you will. Hesitation to use this term stems from the implications that the subject is somehow shoved aside, allowing infinity to fully operate independently within the subject. Yet it is not the powers of the subject which are now in question within this meditation; in question is the source of those powers. Descartes in fact begins the meditation by withdrawing within himself:

I shall now close my eyes, I shall stop my ears, I shall call away all my senses, I shall efface even from my thoughts all images of corporeal things, or at least (for that is hardly possible) I shall esteem them as vain and false; and thus holding converse only with myself and considering my own nature, I shall try little by little to reach a better knowledge of and a more familiar acquaintanceship with myself. (Meditations 147)

Elsewhere Descartes adds that "were I myself the author of my being, I should doubt nothing and I should desire nothing, and finally no perfection would be lacking to me" (158). Having the power of perfection, he would "thus be God" (158). That the subject has power over his world, to the point of alienating from that world, is irrefutable, but that the subject is the very source of this power cannot be justified. For Descartes, it cannot be justified according to the dictates of reason. For Levinas, this lack of rational justification brings with it a lack of ethical justification. Furthermore, whereas Levinas brings philosophy to the possible foundation of the other rather than the subject, that is, ethics rather than ontology, he admits that "the primacy of the moral" in his work does not correspond to Descartes's work, but that he adheres to "the admirable rhythm of Cartesian thinking, which only rejoins the world by passing through the idea of the Infinite" ("Transcendence and Height" 25). Much the same can be said about the "admirable rhythm" of Talmudic thinking, which rests not

on the infinite, not on God, but on his commands, and thus turns to a world to seek out the other and not the God of the other.

Infinity and the Surplus of Meaning

Although this expression of infinity, that of the ground of consciousness, was important for Levinas, it was in another aspect of the word emphasized by Descartes, one somewhat more mundane, that came to influence Levinas's philosophy greatly. It is but a tiny sliver of the whole of the meditations, yet it produces the loudest echo in Levinas's thought. Upon establishing that "God necessarily exists," Descartes comes to meditate on the very meaning of the term infinity, saying

I do not comprehend the infinite, . . . though in God there is an infinitude of things which I cannot comprehend, nor possibly even reach in any way by thought; *for it is of the nature of the infinite that my nature, which is finite and limited, cannot comprehend it.* (Descartes 157) (emphasis added)

Levinas returns to this insight of Descartes again and again to emphasize the true structure of this event, that of the subject's encounter with alterity in its most primal form. In sum, it is the inability to contain the idea of infinity within thought, or as Levinas says, "a thought thinking beyond what it is able to contain in the finitude of its *cogito*" (Of God Who Comes to Mind xiii). In one of the few instances where Levinas refers directly in his Talmudic readings to a specific philosopher, Levinas says that his "awareness" of the "disproportion between the idea and its *ideatum*" derives from Descartes ("From Ethics to Exegesis" 111). Or to speak in terms of language and signification, which are always at the horizons of any discussion by Levinas of ethics or philosophy, significance overflows signification, meaning overflows the thought grasping at it. Phenomenologically, meaning exceeds intentionality, bursting in upon the totality established to render meaning intelligible, an event in which

intention (noesis) shatters the very structures (noema) upon which it is built. By throwing into question the subject's abilities to comprehend meaning, infinity in a sense throws into question the very idea of the power of the subject, which of course is the very beginning of ethics.

The thinking subject, the starting point for nearly all phenomenological analyses, is the starting point for understanding the idea of infinity and its role in experience. This subjective experience confronts the ordinary model of objective experience which typifies the West. As Levinas writes in Totality and Infinity, "the relation with infinity will have to be stated in terms other than those of objective experience," adding that this experience with the infinite as the relation with the *autrui*, the absolutely other, or with "what always overflows thought . . . accomplishes experience in the fullest sense of the word" (25). The term *autrui*, as opposed to the term *autre*, is alternated within any discussion by Levinas with the term infinity. Levinas refers to the infinite as the absolutely other, the other *par excellence*, for it comes to be seen through his discussions, even in the Talmudic readings, as the rupture of alterity into the totality of the subject ("Toward the Other" 16). Subjectivity constructs its totality so that everything within it can be grasped, comprehended, and known; meaning precedes that data so that data may be known. Again, using the model of language, things within a totality bear the sign which signifies the "I" at the center of that totality, reducing alterity to instances of the Same. Nothing exterior confronts the subject. The being within totality "exists as a totality, lives as though it occupied the center of being and were its source, as though it drew everything from the here and now" ("The Ego and the Totality" 25). This totalization represents for Levinas nearly the whole of Western thought, or at least the Western model of knowledge, which Western philosophy continually makes as its foundation. But throughout Levinas's discussions of certain philosophical works, he tends to emphasize perhaps an uneasiness at the heart of those philosophical

projects, an anxiety revealing that the foundation laid out covers over essentially unknown yet far from unfamiliar elements of consciousness. The meditations of Descartes have already been discussed; at other times, we see reference to Plato's idea of the Good as a realm somehow beyond yet reverberating within being (Totality 102). There is also discussion of Kant's and Hegel's notions concerning idealized reason as beyond finite contingencies, but somehow presupposing the finite, making this idealized reason an instance of the Same. Within the thought of these philosophers are the suspicions that fundamental elements of experience remain unstated yet recrudescant, foiling attempts to comprehend them and place them within a system of knowledge, but always making their presence known. They are often given, as in Descartes, for example, as things, which cannot be known fully but certainly never discounted as necessary to experience. Levinas comes to call these elements "prephilosophical experiences," borrowing the term from Alphonse de Waelhens, indicating that they are the foundations that makes philosophy possible, but somehow excluded within the Western tendency to totalize. For Levinas, philosophy must start with the analysis of these "prephilosophical experiences." In fact, he refuses to truly distinguish between the two ("On Jewish Philosophy" 175). In the West, philosophical experience comes to see the model of knowledge as the model of subjectivity. In part this limitation explains Levinas's adherence to phenomenology because it bears a respect for the full range of consciousness, be it emotions, imagination, etc. However, Levinas admits that within his works he emphasizes intelligibility or signification, rather than knowledge, saying that the latter "tends to be construed as a simple lack" (175). Within totality, the subject recognizes exteriority as a lack, for it does not yet bear the subject's stamp of representation. Levinas thus defines knowledge along the same lines as material needs, being demanding yet wholly satiable. In Totality and Infinity, Levinas regards desire as coming from

transcendence, the insatiable movement out from a totality towards the other who can never function as a "need" for the subject.

The other enters into totality through the "event" of the face, the only "sign" within a totality which bears its own signification. As such, it eludes the grasp of the subject; however, this is not to suggest that the other approaches the subject without meaning, for it comes across the distance of a totality bearing its own meaning. In short, its signification is transcendence, the movement across distances between the subject and the elements of its existence, the rupture of immanence, the shattering of totality. In terms of Husserl's phenomenology, the meaning accompanying the face exceeds the grasp of intentionality, especially in light of the fact that intentionality implies an adequation of idea to object, or a familiarity with objects as they appear to consciousness. But, as Levinas writes, "to think the infinite, the transcendent, the Stranger, is hence not to think an object" (49). The relation with the other in this prephilosophical realm "consists in wanting to comprehend him, but this relation overflows comprehension" ("Is Ontology Fundamental?" 6). A distance therefore appears: "the distance that separates ideatum and idea here constitutes the content of the ideatum itself" (Totality 49). This separation of the content of ideatum from the idea that seeks to contain it represents to the subject, of course, the idea of transcendence. Yet, it also represents the notion of infinity in the way that Levinas discusses it, as an eluding of intentionality, both an overflowing and an escape from the grasp of intentionality. Infinity stands as the resistance of the other to the order of the Same. It is produced in that event where "a separated being fixed in its identity, the same, the I, nonetheless contains in itself what it can neither contain nor receive solely by virtue of his own identity" (27). Here we return to the idea of the infinite in Descartes as insertion

into the finite, a foundation for experience coming from beyond the finitude of the subject, and thus a questioning of the source of its powers.

Up to this point, the idea of infinity has been discussed in terms of the face of the other that breaches totality. This is the necessary background for understanding the full implications of infinity and what it presents to the subject. Levinas strives to implicate within his discussions the full range of the experience of infinity; one could dare to say that the encounter with infinity is the true commencement of the human. Again, the term infinity is used here to designate the reverberations within consciousness of the rupture of totality. This totality, however, reveals itself to be the reverberations of the encounter with the infinite as the wholly other. As the phenomenological analyses of Husserl shows, forms or structures precede the content; Levinas inverts this idea somewhat when he says that in intentionality "meaning precedes the data" ("Meaning and Sense" 37). Just as thought parallels the structure of language, meaning or significations come across to consciousness as metaphor, a "reference to absence," in that meaning refers to a beyond-the-given: "the absence to which the metaphor leads would then not be another given but still to come or already past" (36). This "still to come or already past," as we will see, comes to define what Levinas refers to as the "trace" of signification, also given with the term "diachrony," a presence coinciding with an absence, a coming into being that is already eluding the grasp of intentionality. But to return to the idea of meaning, Levinas asserts that it is meaning as metaphor that makes perception possible (36). Of course, this sounds like the earlier discussion of totality in that it is a world, one could say, of order, or of ordered being. The other would then come into this totality bearing its own signification, and in fact, eluding the grasp of intentionality as well as overflowing it. Thus the conclusion becomes that, as Edith Wyschogrod has stated, "the separated self is at least historically prior to the discovery

of the infinite" (The Problem of Ethical Metaphysics 237). "Separated self" here refers to the subject as one separated from the given of existence, "thrown" into it, to borrow from Heidegger who refers to *Geworfenheit* to designate the modality that Dasein finds itself primordially, that of *in-der-Welt-sein*, or already being within the world. This thrownness is seen in Levinas's discussion of the ego in Totality and Infinity as enjoyment or jouissance within its separation or atheism. He writes that

One can call atheism this separation so complete that the separated being maintains itself in existence all by itself, without participating in the Being from which it is separated [. . .] One lives outside of God, at home with oneself; one is an I, an egoism. The soul, the dimension of the psychic, being an accomplishment of separation, is naturally atheist. (Totality 58)

One of the more powerful essays Levinas wrote is "Loving the Torah More Than God," which praises the message within the anonymous fictional work, "Yossel, son of Yossel Rakover from Tarnopol, speaks to God." As the narrator is in his final hours during the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, he "offers us his final thoughts," Levinas writes, thoughts in which, though fictional, "every one of us who survived recognizes his own life in astonishment" (142). Yossel says that the inexplicable suffering he has witnessed seems to confirm that the world is without God, and that man is the sole measure of Good and Evil. Levinas claims that this is "the sanest reaction" for those whose previous experience of the divine was one who dished out rewards and punishments, a God who "treated men like children" (143). Levinas says that "the true path that leads to the one God must be walked in part without God. True monotheism is duty bound to answer the legitimate demands of atheism" (143). God is revealed, Levinas adds, "through the void of the child's heaven," being the precise "moment when God retires from the world and hides His face" (143).

It would seem that this essay, which merely touches upon atheism as an exhaustion of illusions, has no bearing upon the more philosophical atheism discussed before, that of atheism as separation. Both uses of the term, however, are given as necessary foundations for the true discovery of the divine. The former definition of atheism is seen in the confession of Yossel, the narrator who proudly proclaims something which is the "whole of the Torah," according to Levinas (144). "I love him," says Yossel of God, "but I love even more his Torah . . . even if I were deceived by him and became disillusioned, I should nevertheless observe the precepts of the Torah" (144). Levinas praises this because, as he says, "spirituality is offered up not through a tangible substance, but through absence" (145). To be fair, Levinas in this instance refers to God's absence as the commandment to deal ethically with other men and not some mysterious spirit, but the correlation of God's absence with metaphor cannot be avoided anymore than the correlation between the signification of the infinite and the signification of the face of the other can be avoided. In sum, that is why Levinas refuses to truly separate the two (after all, he has said "the aim of the signified by the signifier is not the only way to signify") ("On the Jewish Reading of the Scriptures" 110). The absence of God within this context, which is always alongside the presence of the other, corresponds to the absence/presence structure of the metaphor, which means literally a "carrying beyond," again given as the "trace" or "diachrony" within signification. Levinas writes in the Talmudic reading "The Will of God and the Power of Humanity" that signification essentially is metaphor, with its "strange fecundity of the intelligible, . . . as if the sense of a thought were carried— meta-phor— beyond the end which limits the intention of the speaker" (69). Signification is the movement accompanying transcendence, but if that signification signifies the Same, as it does within a totality, transcendence in effect is closed off. True signification, on the other hand, is true transcendence, true dealings with

others as others, allowing for their "original signification" as others. This is to say not just that dealings with others has the significance of a substitution, of dealing ethically with the other rather than with a "holy spirit"; it is also to say that such dealings have a meaning that extends or carries beyond the mere presence of the other who faces the subject. As Levinas says repeatedly in his works, religion in essence is the ethical relation with the other ("Is Ontology Fundamental?" 8).

To return to the previous discussion, the idea that atheism leads to God, to the discovery of the Infinite, is again taken to mean that atheism or the separation of the subject is historically prior to this discovery. But investigating in detail the ramifications of the "prephilosophical experiences" that Levinas analyzes shows that the infinite, or the event in which the subject encounters the infinite, is in fact prior to the separated self. It cannot be said to be "historically" so, because, in a sense, the encounter with the infinite which the face of the other expresses is an event that consciousness cannot get behind; consciousness's encounter with the other is the antecedent to consciousness itself.

The Oedipal Blindness of Philosophy

Is this notion not impossible, or at least paradoxical? Yes, but only insofar as philosophy looks at it, that is, with an eye towards establishing relations between things as between causes and effects, between things that are wholly independent and totalized, between things that can be known before they are truly encountered. Levinas puts forth this paradox as a challenge to the ontological model of subjectivity, as a "reversal of the gnoseological schema" recognized as inherent to philosophy ("Meaning and Sense" 39). It is to place the ethical commandment as prior to philosophy's commandment to "know thyself."

All of the structures by which the subject comes to know its world, those of sign, signification, transcendence, meaning, and even the interiorization that defines its subjectivity, show the trace of the infinite. Before the face of the other can be seen as something given to the subject that eludes his grasp, "the whole of being has to be produced in order to illuminate the given" (39). That is, a world of signs has to have been created for any sign to intrude upon the subject. Meaning has to have been constructed as a structure before the infinite can overflow intentionality with its own meaning. Separation has to have occurred before the face can interrupt the subject's existence and mark it as separated. The subject must find itself thrown into a world before that world is shattered by the encounter with the infinite.

The structures of intentionality were previously given utilizing the model of language. Objects are grasped by the subject and rendered meaningful by the subject's endowing them with a signification that leads back to the "I" at the heart of a totality. In short, objects signify the subject that perceives them by pointing horizontally to other experiences that the subject has had, letting things become intelligible by becoming familiar. Levinas points out, however, that language presupposes plurality (Totality 73). Language also "implies transcendence, radical separation," and the act of signification. Signification always insists upon antecedents; the infinite is that antecedent which consciousness cannot get behind or even beyond. For the face to bear signification, the subject must already be "reading" his world, encountering things through exegesis, but the face is actually the first instance of a sign that can be "read" by the subject; the face inaugurates signification, and thus "teaches" exegesis. Levinas says that speech or language "is a teaching" (Totality 98). The face must essentially be "read" as a sign among many other signs, but for the subject to have become "literate," it must have encountered the face of the other that establishes signification which renders

things intelligible. The act of signification comes to be the trace that the other leaves within the subject. Yet, it is only through signification that the face can remain wholly exterior to the grasp of intentionality, in that signification expresses a separation and a transcendence. The freedom that the "I" displays by its separation is but an echo of the other who remains free from the grasp of intentionality. Furthermore, for an object to have meaning, it must be established as an essence, but essence becomes established solely through the face of the other because the face brings with it a surplus of meaning. Behind this lies the fact that for the face to appear as a phenomenon which carries this surplus of meaning, and which frustrates the intentional grasp of the subject, the structure of phenomena must already be established, yet as Levinas points out, "the appearing of the phenomenon is already discourse," albeit a discourse between the subject and the world into which it is thrown ("Substitution" 85). Finally, the structure of identity that the self relies on to render his world meaningful and his totality intelligible, comes from the encounter with the other who first establishes identity by signifying only itself, with no reference to the "I" facing it. Thus, separation is learned from the separateness of alterity. The advent of the other produces the very concept of "individual," creating the "essentialization" of the individual that grounds the act of signification from which the "I" makes his world intelligible. Signification as discourse is the response of the subject to something absolutely foreign, demanding exegesis. All of the operations by which the "I" within a totality can experience the breach of that totality in short "make experience possible" ("Meaning and Sense" 39). In the Talmudic reading "And God Created Woman," Levinas refers to Psalm 139, and translates verse 13 "כִּי־אַתָּה קִנִּיתָ כָּל־יָחַי חֲסִמְנִי בִּבְטֶן אִמִּי" in a peculiar way. Others have translated the verse as "for thou hast possessed my reins: thou hast covered me in my mother's womb," (King James Holy Bible), "for thou hast formed my reins; thou hast knit me together in my

mother's womb," (Jerusalem Bible, M. Friedlander) or "for thou has made my heart; thou hast accepted me from my mother's womb" (George Lamsa's Holy Bible). Levinas, however, translates the verse to read: "It was you who *created my conscience*; You fashioned me from my mother's womb" (emphasis added) (167).

Within the drama of signification, "the spectator is an actor," and the "work of cognition" actually begins on the unseen side of being, "from behind the object, in the backstage of being" ("Meaning and Sense" 39). "Sight," writes Levinas, "is not reducible to the welcoming of a spectacle; it at the same time operates in the midst of the spectacle it welcomes" (39). "Expression," which the face of the other reveals for the first time to the ego, "wholly devolves from a thought antecedent to it" (40). The other "is sense primordially, for he gives sense to expression itself, for it is only by him that a phenomenon as a meaning is, of itself, introduced into being" (52). The face of the other could be said in its very first instance to remind the subject, like the infinite in Descartes, that it is not itself the source of its own powers. Or as Levinas says, "consciousness loses its first place" (54). "I am not the mere origin of myself," he writes, "but I am disturbed by the Other" ("Substitution" 94). Philosophy makes the mistake of beginning with the subject, the "I" that thinks, and thus its foundation is shaky at best. It proceeds from an illuminated world, but fails to ask exactly how this world came to be thrown from darkness into the light. Consciousness has been "grasped by philosophers in its moment of return, which is taken for its very birth" ("Meaning and Sense" 55). As Levinas says, "we still reason as though the ego had been present at the creation of the world and as though the world, henceforth in its charge, had issued from an act of free will" ("Substitution" 93). He points out that "it is for this [presumption that all begins with the subject] that Scripture reproaches Job. No doubt he could have understood his misfortunes had they been the result of his

faults" (93). Job, it should be pointed out, sees his suffering not only as a personal wrong emanating from the hands of God, but also an injustice, an impediment to his freedom. He cannot control the manner in which the divine visits upon his existence or enters into his world; he is not the source of its revelation, and his piety does nothing to define or limit it. Philosophy, therefore, is like Oedipus, boldly ignorant of its true beginnings. As Oedipus comes to Thebes unaware that he is but returning to his beginnings, philosophy comes to the subject not realizing that the discovery merely retraces steps. Ironically, Teiresias tells his interrogator Oedipus, "Know yourself, Oedipus," echoing the motto "*gnothi seauton*" at the Temple of Delphi, taken up by Socrates and nearly the whole of philosophy (Oedipus 337). Oedipus's reply of "man" to the riddle of the Sphinx marks him as both clever and impetuous. Friedrich Nietzsche says in The Birth of Tragedy that Oedipus solves the very riddle of nature with this reply, and it is Nietzsche's contention that philosophy also "solves" the riddles of nature with the same response, by having the world of nature in a sense "reflect" the subject. Curiously, once Oedipus recognizes his blindness to the true mysteries behind his existence, he reacts to his situation no longer with outrage or self-pity, but with an ethical turn, an upright sense of obligation to others, to his family and to Thebes, by setting his house in order and resolving to follow divine fate which he had unknowingly disregarded before. This ethical turn and embrace of the obligation toward the other is the reorientation Levinas prescribes for subjectivity, to set it on surer groundings, oriented ethically rather than ontologically. He writes, "to say that subjectivity begins in the person, that the person begins in freedom, that freedom is the primary causality, is to blind oneself to the secret of the self and its relation to the past" ("Substitution" 94).

Reading the Infinite in the Talmud: The Form of Transcendence

Transcendence reveals to the subject that his world, his totality, has been breached. This then is the primordial form of transcendence: the rupture of alterity within the order of the Same. In terms of the infinite, it is the overflow of signification within a signifier, or more properly, the inability of the signifier to contain signification. Levinas's model of subjectivity would have this fissure or this overflow preserved as an opening on to the infinite, on to the endless sources of meanings that transcendence brings with it upon the subject. The subject, in a sense, bears within it the same structure of "trace" or "diachrony," if the latter term is not to be limited to the mere simultaneous presence of different modes of duration, that is, of a future at once coming into the present, yet eluding the stability of immanence. Structures denoting the movement of time already affirm a world into which the subject is thrown; Levinas points to the underlying structure upon which this sense of duration is founded, though he must use language and concepts which by their nature already assume this duration. In short, duration is experience, but Levinas looks to the Talmud to illuminate, like phenomenology does, those events or structures which make experience possible.

For this reason, Levinas seeks to draw out within the Talmud instances which point to these events or structures, for the Talmud and the mode of subjectivity it espouses come to uncover these things, as if they were buried under history or forgotten by the individual. One of these structures that Levinas returns to again and again in his Talmudic readings is that of exegesis, especially one that elicits "infinite" meanings. Many times he refers to the proper study of the Talmud as a "soliciting" of multiple meanings from the text. At times he affirms that it is the particular quality of religious works to overwhelm the reader with significations. In the essay "On the Jewish Reading of Scriptures," Levinas writes that *midrash*, the exposition of meaning from the texts, completes the

Torah and the Talmud by showing that a text contains more than it bears within its words, a quality of religious texts he calls "inspired" (109). The type of reading that exegesis requires shows that a certain verse or statement being commented upon

exceeds what it originally wants to say; that what it is capable of saying goes beyond what it wants to say; that it contains more than it contains; that perhaps an inexhaustible surplus of meaning remains locked in the syntactic structures of the sentence, in its word-groups, its actual words, phonemes and letters, in all this materiality of the saying which is potentially signifying all the time. Exegesis would come to free, in these signs, a bewitched significance that smoulders beneath the characters or coils up in all this literature of letters. (109)

Midrash comes to be the "ability to force open the secret of transcendence," its secret being that it cannot be contained within the subject, but like the visitation of the other, calls out to the subject to be addressed. "Interpretation," Levinas writes, "essentially involves this act of soliciting without which what is not said, inherent in the texture of the statement, would be extinguished beneath the weight of the texts, and sink into the letters" (110). The correlation to the ethical demand from the other, the demand that Levinas says is the beginning of discourse, resounds throughout the Talmudic readings, as if the Talmud were this other, as if the text "faced" the reader and gave the cry, as Levinas puts it, "interpret me" ("Sur la philosophie juive" 199). This entreaty, coming from the text, comes to the reader with an ethical demand to allow for its own meaning, meaning that comes from beyond itself, signifying beyond the text. What this suggests is that the book, "before becoming a document," represents a "modality by which what is said lays itself open to exegesis, [and] calls for it," showing that meaning "immobilized" in the writing "already tears the texture in which it is held" (110). Robert Bernasconi refers to this as "Levinasian hermeneutics," one that shows the act of reading as revealing "the ethical Saying at work within the Said of the text" (qtd. in Critchley 31). Summing up Levinas's view, Simon Critchley says that through the act of exegesis, "the passage to

transcendence is produced, the transcendence of the Other" (Critchley 31). Levinas has said of exegesis that "it is in exegesis— interpolating itself between the obvious and the non-immediate meaning, but which *teaches*— that the passage to transcendence is produced" (qtd. in Critchley 56). This interpolation between the obvious and the non-immediate corresponds both to the structure of diachrony within meaning itself, and to the infinity of meaning that transcendence reveals within itself. Both structures are necessary to Levinas's reading of infinity within the Talmud.

Critchley's explication of a general hermeneutics within Levinas's works are in context of his argument for an ethical understanding of the act of deconstructive reading, given in his book The Ethics of Deconstruction. In short, Critchley argues that deconstruction is in practice a double reading, giving in essence two layers of meaning, the first being the more dominant interpretation, and the second giving a reading that destabilizes the stability of the dominant interpretation (26). This destabilization in fact comes from the very ambiguities and contradictions emanating from the text itself. The goal, as Critchley sees it, is to "locate a point of otherness" within the text and then "deconstruct" the conceptuality that the reading of a text relies upon, all from the position of that alterity (26). The re-orientation of the text to the other of the text is but the desire to have the text say that which it is unable to say (29). For Critchley, this opening up of a text to its other is ethical, for it is the attempt to break the "ethical Saying" from the text's "ontological Said" (30). Levinas's hermeneutics, therefore, can be said to be a deconstructive reading on one hand, but on the other hand, and especially within his Talmudic readings, it is significantly something more. For the model of reading here that Critchley works with, and the one that Derrida himself assumes, is that of a more ontological or philosophical model. Specifically, it is the philosophical subject of the West that reads texts here, just as he reads the "signs" of his world, making of them a "presence" and of the meaning

of the text a "stable" interpretation. The subject that reads the Talmud properly, however, is not this philosophical subject; it is the subject that Jewish tradition, specifically the Talmud, calls for and engenders.

In the Talmudic reading "Au-delà de l'État dans l'État," or "Beyond the State in the State," Levinas refers to the Torah as the object whose "incessant study" creates a vigilance of thought which "seeks the absolute," and thus is the very "wakefulness of thought" (69/100). Such wakefulness is needed for "la multiplicité des significations" which coexist within the Talmud, in part for those meanings to come forward from the readings of the Talmud, but also for the reading subject which the Talmud creates, to remain open to alterity, keeping him "awake" ("Terre promise" 130). For Levinas, both the Talmud and the Torah have a "surplus of truth," an ability to signify beyond what is given plainly within the text ("Mépris de la Thora" 74). "La parole de Dieu," he writes, has more "dimensions of meaning" than logical structure allows for, as if logic, or at least logical translation, in some way commits "treason" by creating "closure" ("A l'image de Dieu" 186). Levinas in fact argues that it would be betrayal of these holy works and the traditions they have founded to lend to them a single or dominant interpretation; Judaism demands continual reinterpretation and renewal of the traditional texts through constant reading. Thus the ambiguities or possibilities that the reader of the Talmud brings to that book do not destabilize or deconstruct meaning as much as they fulfill it.

Levinas brings up "certain manners of reading" in his essay "De la lecture juive des Ecritures," where he refers to "le pluralisme caractéristique de la pensée rabbinique," a characteristic that is not contradictory to the Revelation, but in essence "la vie même" of the words of God (125). He focuses on this pluralistic aspect of rabbinical hermeneutics rather than giving an inventory of the entire

tradition, but he does refer to one traditional stance in particular, "le fameux quatre niveaux de lecture" (125). Given in the acronym פדרש, "pardes" or orchard, the four levels are פשט, "peshat" or plain meaning, רמז, "remez" or allusive meaning, דרש, "derash" or solicited meaning, and סוד, "sod" or secret meaning. Even the form of the Talmud's pages reveals the plurality of Jewish tradition: the page centers around a Mishnah or a particular excerpt from the Oral Law. Surrounding this is a Gemara, or discussion and interpretation of the Mishnah by specific rabbinical scholars, always named so as to refuse anonymity of interpretation of the Talmud, an important element to Jewish tradition for Levinas. Entering the text of the Talmud, therefore, is to enter into a discourse, into a Saying rather than a Said. Levinas refers again and again to the Talmud as living through its constant renewal, through "une incessante exégèse— et exégèse de cette exégèse" (71). His own Talmudic readings suggest this "exegesis of exegesis" by including the Talmudic extract in its entirety, then by dialectically moving between his own readings and those of the former scholars and commentators recorded alongside the original extract from the Torah. The multiplicity of meanings shows that the traditional texts allow for perpetual exegesis because they have the distinction of containing more than they contain, that distinction Levinas calls "inspiré" ("De la lecture juive des Ecritures" 135, 136, 137). He writes:

Inspiration: sens autre qui perce sous le sens immédiat du vouloir-dire, sens autre faisant signe à un entendement qui écoute au-delà de ce qui est entendu, à la conscience extrême, à la conscience réveillée. (137)

Levinas supplements this definition of inspiration by referring to the meaning arising from beneath the immediate meaning as a voice of another, taking hold of it as a result of this resonance and organizing its content. Furthermore,

Le message comme message éveille l'écoute à l'intelligible irrécusable, au sens des sens, au visage de l'autre homme. L'éveil est précisément cette proximité d'autrui. Le message comme dans sa façon d'éveiller est la modalité, le << comment >> même de l'éthique qui dérange l'ordre établi de l'être menant, impénitent, son train d'être. (136-37).

In a footnote to the above excerpt, Levinas says that ethics is possible only under a "traumatisme" where presence is disturbed by the other (138). Within this awakening that the act of reading enacts in the subject, we have, Levinas says, "la figure originelle de l'au-delà" freed from all mythology of transcendence as coming from "arrière-mondes" (138).

In the Talmudic reading "Mépris de la Thora comme idolâtrie," the duality of the Saying and the Said that Levinas puts forward in Autre qu'être finds a parallel with the discussion of the Torah and idolatry, the latter of which is defined in one manner as cults, ideologies, fads, or even "grandes passions" (70). What these all share in common, however, is "quelque fermeture secrète de l'âme," a closing of the heart that is content with any "fétiche symbole ou représentation pris pour concepts" (70). With this statement Levinas reveals idolatry and the fixation on concepts, which marks philosophy as well as other things, as arising from the same "fermeture" of the subject to the outside, to alterity, and to transcendence. Levinas goes even further and says that the Torah itself is the "livre de l'anti-idolâtrie, contradictoire absolu de l'idolâtrie" (70). The Torah itself is the antithesis of idolatry by its very nature as a book. Levinas states that the Torah, and by extension the Talmud, preserves against idolatry by its essence as "Livre," that is, through its writing which calls for "la lecture permanente," or constant interpretation and reinterpretation (70-71). As a book that is ever calling for exegesis, it is "étranger à tout engagement aveugle qui se croirait vertueux à cause de sa fermeté ou entêtement" (71). Opposed to a modality of being closed off to transcendence, reading here is given as an analysis whose free discussion is always current (71). And, as such, it is a tradition

arising from the past, but kept constantly alive, always relevant, always as Saying freed from the Said, freed from history. The Talmud for Levinas seems to be "in love with the possible," so it demands that a reader recall it to its life of dialogue and polemic, where "les sens multiples– mais non arbitraires– se lèvent et bourdonnent dans chaque dire" (Quatre lectures talmudiques 13).

There are other levels in which this notion of a multiplicity of meaning operates, of course, an important one being the very nature of Hebrew syntax. Context and consonants for certain words are very important, for they designate the vowel sounds, nikkud, added to pronounce them (vocalic dots are added to Hebrew letters to designate vowels, a more recent convention in Hebrew). For example, the word דג "degee" as in דג ים "degee yam" designates 'ocean fish'; the same two letters in the word דגה, however, are pronounced "dagah," which means 'fishing reserves.' Levinas refers to this quality of Hebrew in the essay "La Revelation dans la tradition juive," where he notes that throughout the tradition there is a compulsion to go beyond the obvious meaning of words. Although the plain meaning is valid on one level, it is not always easy to establish by going back to the original texts for confirmation, so on another level a word may be an opening onto another word, and thus another world of meaning. By going back to the original, one enters into "l'étrange ou la mystérieuse ambiguïté ou la polysémie" that "la syntaxe hébraïque" demands (161). In Hebrew syntax the reader sees words coexist rather than subordinate to each other (161). This search for a buried meaning, for a meaning that arises only to an active awareness of context and suggestion, is for Levinas characteristic of an exegesis specific to the Jewish tradition of reading Scripture (161). Such an exegesis, as has been stated, forces a modality that is never closed off to transcendence in its basic form of signification, as the infinite impress of meaning upon a signifier. As Levinas says,

Pa un verset, pas un mot de l'Ancien Testament— lu de lecture religieuse, lu en guise de Révélation— qui ne s'entrouvre sur tout un monde, d'abord insoupçonné, et qui enveloppe le lisible. (161-62)

"Révélation" in this context refers to transcendence, the coming of infinity to the subject, or signification exceeding the grasp of the subject/reader of Scripture. Levinas distinguishes in this same essay between "religious reading" and reading for philology or historical criticism; elsewhere he criticizes the more "modern" modes of reading which seek their own purposes or meanings, as in the introduction to Quatre lectures talmudiques where he refers to historical or structural analysis (14). He comments that one cannot refuse "les lumières de l'histoire"; however, these illuminations "ne suffisent pas à tout" (14).

Some examples here will illustrate just how Levinas reveals through the language itself the multiplicity of meaning within the Talmud. In the reading entitled "Terre promise ou terre permise," Levinas takes up a Talmudic extract of two pages from the tractate Sotah, pp. 34b-35a, devoted to the narrative concerning the men chosen to explore the land of Canaan, promised to the Israelites. When they return, they declare that the Israelites will not be able to either enter or live in the promised land. It is fertile, but it is a land that kills or devours, by grinding down the inhabitants (117). Also, they report, the land is already inhabited and guarded by men too strong for the Israelites (117). The explorers, however, are dissembling, in an effort to keep the Israelites from entering Canaan, an ethical decision as Levinas will point out. Levinas claims that he will not speak directly on this story, only on the Talmudic commentary, but truth be told, his own interpretation of the commentary reveals the deeper and ethical meaning behind the explorer's actions. As he says, "nous arriverons peut-être à trouver dans la grande peur des explorateurs des angoisses qui nous sont plus familières" (118). He asserts that the agonizing the explorers display is actually familiar to us,

and shows how Jewish thought has, through its history, come to know "tous les scrupules et tous les remords," even those concerning the most sacred of Jewish rights, as in the case of land promised by God (118). The tractate focuses on one verse from the Torah, Deuteronomy 1:22, specifically the words "That they may explore the land for us" (Lamsa's Holy Bible). The Talmud records that Rav Hiya bar Abba says that the explorers sought out the shame of the land, reading "*veyachprou*" or וישכר as 'explore,' which is followed by his reference to Isaiah 24:23: "The moon will be ashamed ("*vechapra*" or וישכר) and the sun will be confounded" (119). Levinas points out that the similarities between the words are allowed to influence the reading of the text, for he says "le deuxième sens déteint sur le premier," adding that from Rav Hiya bar Abba's reading, those who explore the land will be covering it in shame: "l'intention des explorateurs n'était donc pas honnête" (120). The explorers, Levinas concludes, decide in advance to "shame" the land so the Israelites will not enter into it. This exegesis, he says, is "sollicitation du texte, s'il en existe" (120). But it is also the attempt to animate the text by "des correspondances et des échos" (120). He notes that when a Talmudist comments on a biblical text and refers to another biblical text, the context of the quotation must be considered, for it is a question of associating one "paysage biblique" with another through this juxtaposition, extracting the "parfum secret" of the first passage (120). Returning to Rav Hiya bar Abba's "sollicitation" of the text, the double meaning is born out by the full reading that Levinas gives, for the explorers went into Canaan to find it already occupied; to move the Israelites in would be an injustice to those already occupying the land. Thus, the edicts of God are questioned when they come up against the ethics of the Talmud: "il est plus fort que Lui, le droit vital des indigènes est plus fort que le droit moral d'un Dieu universel" (143). Thus, this reading shows that, according to Levinas,

the acceptance of the Torah is acceptance of universal justice, even to the point of questioning the commandments of God (140).

In a similar vein, Levinas makes use of multiple significations within the Talmud in his reading entitled "Vieux comme le monde?", from the tractate Sanhedrin, pp. 36b-37a. In this excerpt, Rav Zera makes reference to Genesis 27:27, where Jacob deceives his father Isaac, blind in his old age, by donning his brother Esau's clothes, which smell like the fields in which he hunts (Lamsa's Holy Bible). The line contains the words "the smell of my son is the smell of a field which the Lord has blessed," and Rav Zera says "Il ne faut pas lire begadev (ses vêtements), mais bogdav (ses rebelles) (Lamsa's Holy Bible 27.27; "Vieux comme le monde?" 153). Zera does not yoke the readings of the word too violently here, for both are spelled in Hebrew as בִּגְדָו. Levinas echoes this suggestion of Rav Zera, adding that what Isaiah smells is the generations of rebels who, like him, would rebel against the Law, adding that this was but "encens" to the nose of Isaac (181). For Levinas this means that "les moins dignes d'entre les Israélites sont pleins de mérite comme la grenade regorge de grains" (181).

Not every question of semantics that Levinas brings up within his Talmudic readings are an "opening" on a world of meaning; at times he restricts meaning so as to lend more fidelity in his readings to the original texts, at times putting into question the Talmud's commentary on the original verses from the Torah. This, of course, is in line with the assertion shared by Levinas with many Talmudic scholars that reading the Talmud involves polemics, interrogation, free association, and even creativity. Here, though, is seen the defense of a tradition, that is, a clarification made by returning to the original texts, despite custom. He makes the case, for example, in the reading "Et Dieu créa la femme" for his translation of *yetzer*, יֵצֶר. The reading is from the tractate Berakhot,

p.61a, and focuses on Genesis 2:7, where God makes man. Rav Nahman asks just why the word "made" or *yetzer*, כפי, has two *yods*, the letter "י"; usually, if doubled it represents a vocalization of *yod* as 'ya' or 'yayee,' as in *garbayeem*, גרביים, meaning "socks." Nahman concludes that the double *yod* means that God created two inclinations in man, bad and good (122). Levinas admits that he translates "deux penchants" according to custom, but *yetzer* actually means "creature" (127). He points to Isaiah 29:6, which he reads as "La créature (*yetser*) a dit au Créateur, il n'a rien compris," adding that "il est ici évident que *yetzer* ne signifie pas penchant mais créature" (127). Levinas goes on to say that in making one creature, God creates two; not a reference to man and woman, as is usually suggested, but actually signifying a rupture in the depth of man that defines him, two tendencies that pull against each other: "La conscience et la liberté définiraient l'homme : la raison" (128).

Another level of multiple meaning functioning within the Talmud comes through in what Levinas calls the paradigmatic method, wherein a concrete example resonates with multiple dimensions of meaning. Levinas even suggests that the multiplicity of understanding possible within the reading of the Talmud comes not from ambiguity, but "de la richesse inépuisable des dimensions innombrables du concret" ("La volonté du ciel" 17). Maybe, Levinas conjectures, "nos concepts occidentaux" detach themselves prematurely: "Oh, l'impatience du concept" (17). In order to obtain any meaning from the Talmud that speaks to contemporary times, despite its antiquated language, the reader must patiently admit the peculiarities of the text within their own proper universe ("De la lecture juive des Écritures" 127). Impatience with these particulars keeps the Talmud in a sense "imprisoned" within anachronisms and local features of its own language; as within totalization, meaning becomes "occluded," shut out by being shut in within either literal meaning or generalized

concepts. Instead, words signified through the concrete are actually enriched with meanings by the very multiplicity of their concrete aspects (127). For Levinas,

C'est ce que nous appelons modalité paradigmatique de la réflexion talmudique : les notions restent constamment en communications avec les exemples ou y retournent, alors qu'elles auraient dû s'en contenter comme de tremplins pour s'élever à la généralisation, ou éclairent la pensée qui scrute par la lumière secrète des mondes cachés ou isolés où elle fait irruption ; et, a la fois, ce monde enchâssé ou perdu dans les signes s'illumine par la pensée qui lui vient du dehors ou de l'autre bout du canon, révélant ses possibles qui attendaient l'exégèse, immobilisés, en quelque façon, dans les lettres. (127)

These "notions" which keep in constant "communication" or discourse with the concrete examples that deliver them unto the reader, escape the grasp of generalization and thematization, as if they were like the faces of multiple others, concretely realized yet permeating that concreteness with infinite significations. This would suggest a certain irony accorded to the roles of generalization and concreteness, or to thematization and singularity; the former, not the latter, inhibits signification by effacing its entrance into a world of meaning, that is, through the concrete. Generalization, by refusing the irruption of immanence, closes off transcendence; generalization never comes as alterity, as *l'autre*, but always as the return of the Same to the Same.

With this paradigmatic method, which he calls "un procédé théorétique pour comprendre le Réel," Levinas traces Talmudic discourse through its numerous paths and flights, always returning to examples, developing new concepts from these examples, only to set out again through readings toward new directions ("La volonté du ciel" 18). This is not to suggest that the paradigm focused upon somehow separates from the idea or concept it generates, as if it were pure symbol, never signifying itself. He does refer to this paradigmatic method as a way of exploring the multiple possibilities of signifying within a concrete object freed from its history, which would suggest that

he attempts to universalize the Talmud at the expense of historical context (Quatre lectures talmudiques 21). The paradigmatic method, it should be noted, is in line with that "rabbinical mode" of midrash, which, according to Levinas, "sollicite la lettre du texte pour, par-delà le sens obvie, le sens caché et allusif" ("<<A l'image de Dieu>>" 185). In the Talmudic reading "Envers autrui," Levinas makes it clear that in his paradigmatic method, ideas are never separate from the examples "qui les suggère mais qui les fixe" ("Envers autrui" 48). In the introduction to his Quatre lectures talmudiques he states that the significance of the Talmud comes from those "signes" whose "materialité" are borrowed from the Scriptures (16). Thus, when "les docteurs du Talmud" battle each other over meanings through reference to biblical verse, they do so not out of appeal to authority, but to a context which permits the elevation of the debate and the perception of the true significance of the data given: "Le transfert d'une idée dans un autre climat– et qui est son climat originel– lui arrache de nouveaux *possibles*" ("Envers autrui" 48). Ideas then are prevented from becoming fixed through a conceptualization that "éteindrait bien des étincelles qui dansent sous le regard braqué sur le Réel" (48).

One example of this "paradigmatic" reading comes actually from Levinas's mysterious instructor in the Talmud, Mordechai Chouchani, of whom very little was known. What Levinas reveals about this "prestigious master" is restricted to scant reference to proper exegetical methods or attitudes; Levinas claims that Chouchani rendered it impossible to read the Talmud in a purely dogmatic or theological way (Quatre lectures talmudiques 22). Instead, Chouchani provided the grounds for the hermeneutical freedom required for a reading which keeps the Talmudic discourse alive within the present. But Levinas credits one aspect of his hermeneutics directly to his mentor,

Chouchani: whenever the Talmud mentions "Israel," one should read it as "humanity" ("Judaïsme et révolution" 18).

To read the word "Israel" simply as "un groupe ethnique particulier" that is accomplishing an incomparable destiny would be to narrow the generality announced within the particular Talmudic passage in which it is found (18). In sum, it would be to restrict the example that the people of Israel represent to historical or even mythological significance, separating the sign from the full range of significance that it bears. Israel's acceptance of the Law within the Torah comes to represent, as Levinas reiterates throughout his Talmudic readings, humanity at the height of its responsibilities and self-consciousness. "Tous les hommes," he writes, "sont d'Israël" ("Les dommages causés par le feu" 171). Jewish "election" expresses an acknowledgment of an incontestable summons ("La révélation dans la tradition juive" 172). The nation of Israel's status of being chosen among the nations represents, then, not provincialism and pride, but the inability to evade ethical responsibility; its exile and diaspora which ends with the messiah's entrance into history, shows that the end of humanity's responsibilities which mark the messianic time of peace, is always coming, always a possibility, yet never arriving, marking the infinite capacity of the Other to call upon the self. Understanding the Talmud in this way allows for Levinas's readings to reveal and define those "prephilosophical" experiences he sees within the whole of Hebraic experience. He says of the very elements of Israel, its history, its traditions, its Scriptures and their interpretations, that they all "constituent une *figure* où se montre un mode primordial de l'humain et où, avant toute théologie et en dehors de toute mythologie, Dieu vient à l'idée" ("De l'éthique à l'exégèse" 127-28). It represents, he adds, the "défi d'un retournement ontologique!" (128).

This paradigmatic method of his Talmudic reading has its parallels within Levinas's philosophy, it could be argued, for his adherence to the phenomenological method demonstrates his desire to obtain the universals of life by exhibiting the concrete elements of experience within his analysis. There are other examples, of course, such as his focus on the "visage" of the other, rather than just a general idea of otherness. The meaning that the face brings within subjectivity, "Thou shall not kill," is a paradigm for preserving the identity and dignity of the other person ("Mépris de la Thora comme idolâtrie" 76). Whether the prominence of the concrete in his philosophy developed from his Judaism, or the concrete became central in his Talmudic readings through his encounter with phenomenology, is debatable, but no doubt the two "worlds" of Levinas correspond, and at times, certainly interact and inform each other.

Again, what marks the paradigmatic method is the underlying structure of transcendence, the presence of the concrete which simultaneously disrupts and escapes the immanence of subjectivity. The "visage" of the concrete actually signals an openness toward infinite signification, or perhaps it should be said, toward the signification of infinity. Levinas has referred to this paradigmatics in terms of symbolism, but not one imposing mere conventional elements upon the flesh of the symbol, nor one restricting meaning to the symbolizing function of one aspect of the concrete (Quatre lectures talmudiques 19). "La chair concrète du symbole," Levinas writes, "ne s'étiôle pas sous le revêtement symbolique qu'une convention ou une circonstance lui prête" (20). Talmudic commentary has always tolerated the enrichment of the symbol through the concrete (20). Like phenomenology, the Talmud can only be understood by beginning with life itself, as it is lived in the concrete, in the way that meaning presents itself to consciousness (20). Most importantly, though, and in paradoxical terms Levinas gives to describe the complexities of signification, the concrete flesh of the symbol gives

literal meaning, which signifies completely, but this is not yet the signified, for this signified always remains 'yet-to-be-sought' (19).

Reading God in the Talmud: The Content of Transcendence

As this investigation into the paradigmatic method reveals, the ability of the concrete to come as fully present, fully *signifying*, yet remain absent from the grasp of intention which would make it fully *signified*, announces the same enigma of infinity which manifests in what Levinas calls "diachrony." Essentially the same concept he calls "trace" in his earlier works, diachrony represents this duality within signification, of absence and presence, of past and present, of present and future, of appearance and withdrawal,—all "read" within signification simultaneously. But even defining it this way may seem incorrect; as Jill Robbins notes, the trace "escapes not only phenomenal presence but the very conceptual opposition between presence and absence," remaining in Levinas's thought "outside the presence/absence dyad" (Altered Reading 28). Fully signifying yet not signifying completely, the most accurate thing to say is perhaps that diachrony is not present in signification, but simply "read" within signification.

Diachrony is not limited by Levinas to specific aspects of his work; the term appears anytime he discusses the event of signification, sometimes without referring to the term directly. Defining it, therefore, requires often the examples used to denote the structure of transcendence marked by diachrony, be it the face of the other or the context of the Talmud. In any case, diachrony accompanies or perhaps fulfills the event of alterity: "the signified is of another order than the given," "never a complete presence" within the given ("Meaning and Sense" 42; Totality and Infinity 96). In the presence of the *autrui*, the "I" responds to "an 'order' in which signifyingness remains an

irremissible disturbance, an utterly bygone past"; "such is the signifyingness of a trace," Levinas says, "a trace signifies outside of every intention" ("Meaning and Sense" 60-61). As disturbance, it is called "miracle," one that is a "dérangement de l'ordre," coming into the order of the Same as alterity, which is "la structure - ou la dé-structure - de la transcendance" ("La volonté du ciel" 34). Such irruption reveals the "Noncoincidence" and "dispossession" of alterity, as when the face of the other "enters our world from an absolutely foreign sphere" (Of God Who Comes to Mind xiv). Plainly defined, "diachrony is the refusal of conjunction, the nontotalizable and, in this sense, infinite," which "signifies beyond being" ("Essence and Disinterestedness" 118; "Meaning and Sense" 61).

This staunch alterity does not result from the "residue of presence," as if absence was former presence, for that would be a trace which signals a former conjunction of signification and sign ("Essence and Disinterestedness" 118). Diachrony presents a rupture within time and space. The infinite reveals in a diachrony the coming of a world which never ceases coming ("Mépris de la Thora comme idolâtrie" 72). Within his "Jewish" writings, Levinas will come to align this diachronic notion of diverging movements of time with the notion of messianism, as we shall see in the last chapter. The infinite cannot enter into the present because the present is too small to contain it ("La révélation dans la tradition juive" 173). Within the order of the subject, the other's presence "consists in divesting himself of the form which does already manifest him" ("Meaning and Sense" 53). The face of this other is this concrete irruption into order, yet also the "detachment from its form in the midst of the production of its form" (53).

The paradoxes and contradictions given to suggest the content of diachrony point to the notion that diachrony or the trace "signifies beyond being" ("Meaning and Sense" 61). This "beyond being" is central to much of Levinas's thought, designating the move of transcendence as well as the

signification of the Infinite, or God. Philosophical discourse for Levinas cannot properly include God, for once it does, "as soon as he is conceived," God becomes "situated within 'being's move'" ("God and Philosophy" 130). But the Infinite reveals itself to be eluding presence while simultaneously coming into its own signification. Levinas writes that "this divergency perhaps deserves the name glory," a name that also represents diachrony in some of his works, especially when the ethical "height" of the Infinite is to be stressed ("Essence and Disinterestedness" 118). The sign which properly bears this signification is the face of the other, registering a "personal order" that is "beyond being" ("Meaning and Sense" 61). Importantly, the other does not come from beyond being in the form of God, and neither does God make of the other his avatar. The other shows that there is a "beyond" of my order, that this order can be disrupted and breached by meaning which comes from beyond. It would be in a sense 'too early in the game' to say 'that which breaches my own order is yet another order, simply outside of my own.' That would be to already comprehend the beyond of my order. At the level of experience that Levinas aims his analysis at, the irruption of transcendence comes before consciousness can establish itself as the source of its own order, before even its own self-knowledge.

More proper to this diachronic notion of transcendence, Levinas says "beyond being is a Third Person" (61). Not that society is discovered through the other, but that there is a possibility of a third direction, one that escapes the "bipolar play of immanence and transcendence" (61). It is third person because it is simply beyond first person. The other as second person shows disruption, while the very fact that it brings signification that exceeds the grasp of intentionality, overflowing and exceeding the face of the other which faces me, reveals a beyond of order in the abstract, beyond even the

concreteness of the other's existence. Diachrony is the insertion of space and time which signifies this beyond, and gives birth to the notion of essence ("Meaning and Sense" 62-63).

The beyond or "nonpresence" of the infinite is "not a figure of negative theology" for Levinas, for all negative attributes that point to a beyond of essence become positive within the ethical responsibility it commands from the subject ("Essence and Disinterestedness" 118). God's withdrawal from presence and hence the stasis of being, is not a "non-connaissance" or "non-knowledge" but man's obligation regarding all other men ("Le nom de Dieu d'après quelques textes talmudiques" 153). Additionally, Levinas disavows any claim to any theology, or even what he calls theosophy, seeking the meaning of the word outside of any theological system ("Jeunesse d'Israël" 72). Throughout his Talmudic readings, Levinas stresses that his reference to the word "God" has specific meanings and contexts. The term names a mode of being or a beyond of being rather than a quiddity or essence ("D'après quelques textes talmudiques" 148). Theology, however, deals with God as a quiddity that can be known, as an essence that can be fully signified as presence. Levinas says of his own efforts within the Talmudic readings that he seeks to go beyond the theological language, to liberate from this language "significations qui s'adressant à la raison," in a search for "une théo-logique," a rational way to speak of God ("Envers autrui" 33; L'au-delà du verset 11). Levinas is at all times seeking a meaning for what can be termed God, something which no negative theology or hyperbolic proposition can fill with meaning ("Exigeant judaïsme" 20). He guards against what within the Talmud would pass for information regarding the life of God, for "une théosophie" (32). Levinas sees theosophy as "la négation même de la philosophie," and his struggle to translate "Hebrew" into "Greek" demands a hermeneutic proper to this task ("La tentation de la tentation" 71). Thus, he claims that in his commentaries "le mot Dieu sera rare": "Il exprime la notion la plus claire

religieusement; philosophiquement, la plus obscure qui soit" (70). The notion expressed by God can become clearer, Levinas says, only through the Talmud's descriptions of the ethical situations of the human, rather than ontological situations of the divine (70-71).

The meaning of God, then, comes through in the structure of transcendence; to borrow Levinas's terms, God is not only the Other *par excellence*, but transcendence *par excellence*. He says of the Scroll of Esther that therein "le nom de Dieu n'est pas prononcé," but there God's presence is expressed through His absence ("La traduction de l'Ecriture" 57). The infinite as God "reads" through the diachrony of signification, appearing yet eluding presence, and like a "trace," effacing its very own signification. The idea of effacement is central to Judaic concern over the very name of God, as Levinas details in the essay "Le nom de Dieu d'après quelques textes talmudiques." The writing of the sacred names of God (only a few are sanctioned as Holy) cannot be erased or effaced; the document which has even the first letter degraded in some way must be buried like a dead body. But there are exceptions, one of which deals with the ritual concerning a woman suspected of adultery. During part of the ritual, the priest speaks these words and writes them down, which are along these lines: "if someone besides your husband has lain with you, may the Lord make of you a subject of imprecation" (153). The priest will then efface them with "les eaux amères" (153). Levinas says here that the Talmud "affirme une idée nouvelle : l'effacement du Nom est la réconciliation des humains" (153). Another example is given, this time of King David who digs to discover the source or water necessary for future libations. The water rises impetuously, threatening to flood the universe. David receives the advice that, to obtain harmony between man and wife, he must efface the name of God with the water: "A plus forte raison cela doit se faire pour obtenir la paix dans l'Univers" (153). Levinas then asks if the transcendence of the name of God, compared to every

thematization, does not itself become effacement, and if this very effacement is not itself the commandment "qui m'oblige à l'égard de l'autre homme?" (153).

This, then, is the drive to interpret the name or appearance of God in the Talmud for Levinas—to see within the Talmud only the effacement of God's transcendence, so that what actually appears is the ethical situation given through the other: "La transcendance de Dieu, c'est son effacement même., mais qui nous oblige à l'égard des hommes" (154). Within rabbinical thought, Levinas points out, the term holiness evokes above all else separation, as in the word "Absolute," absolved from presence in a manner of speaking ("D'après quelques textes talmudiques" 147-48). In the Talmudic reading "La volonté du ciel et le pouvoir des hommes," Levinas refers to the Talmud as the place where "l'épiphanie de Dieu invoquée dans l'apparition d'un visage humain" (37). There in the face of the other, "la différence irréductible" of the beyond enters between what is given and understood within my world, and what under this order absents itself, "inquiète et éveillé" (36).

Levinas, as far as he can, remains true to his word, using the word "Dieu" very carefully, and in the same vein as the Talmud— "effacing" it, or disinvesting it by investing it only in the ethical event of other. In the reading "La transcendance de Dieu," which deals with judiciary sanctions, the court of the Sanhedrin itself appears as the locus of transcendence, a transcendence which lies at the very heart of its decisions, a transcendence which is "le pénétration du divin dans le monde à travers le prophétisme humain" (38). The "prophetism," as will be shown in the next chapter, comes to describe the individual's reading of the sacred texts, a discourse bearing meaning from its encounter with the text. The court's configuration is itself testament to the underlying structure of transcendence; formed as a semi-circle of men, men face each other, an "assemblée de visages" where discourse cannot be interrupted nor turned into "dialectique impersonnelle" ("Vieux comme le monde?" 155). Levinas

says of this feature that no one ever saw the back of anyone else; curiously, the only reference Levinas makes in his reading to the appearance of God to the eyes is the back of God, seen by Moses, the prophet with the most direct contact with God ("La Révélation dans la tradition juive" 174). What he saw was only the back of God, the knots on the back of his neck formed by the straps of the phylacteries (174). Even the semi-circle formation is elucidated by Levinas: those who sit on the court remain open to the outside world, as if closing off the Sanhedrin order of justice to transcendence would be the end of that justice ("Vieux comme le monde?" 155).

God manifests within the concrete event of the face because man is the irruption of God into being or the explosion of being toward God ("La Révélation dans la tradition juive" 172). Man simply is "le lieu où passe la transcendance" (175). As the instance of subjectivity, through its possibilities of listening and thus obeying, man is himself the rupture of immanence (174). Again, God does not come into a subject in the face of the other; the other is not avatar. God simply "vient à l'idée," or "comes to mind," through the event of the other because, as infinity, He is the surplus of meaning, the order from which this meaning comes to the concrete event of the face that eludes intentionality. As alterity *par excellence*, He is the Third Person that disrupts totality, signified within the face but never coming to be fully signified.

The singularity of the subject comes from its diachronic structure elucidated earlier— the subject is always the bearer of another subject ("Et Dieu créa la femme" 133). As such, it is "être sous le regard sans sommeil de Dieu," as Levinas remarks from the Talmudic reading from which Rav Jeremiah ben Eleazar's commentary on Psalm 139, part of which reads "From the beginning to the end, thou knowest me, O Lord, for thou hast formed and laid thy hand upon me" (King James Holy Bible, Psalms 139:5). Keeping faithful to the tradition of Talmudic reading which calls for contexts

of all biblical quotations to be considered, Levinas reads beyond the citation of verse 5 from the Talmudic extract "Et Dieu créa la femme," noting that the verses go on to say "Tu me serres de près derrière et devant et tu poses sur moi ta main" (131). He says of Eleazar's reading that it shows the subject to be always at the hands of God, unable to escape his gaze (131). God's presence in this passage signifies "être assiégé par Dieu ou obsédé par Dieu. Obsession ressentie comme une élection" (131). Humanity therefore shows that "tout est ouvert," open to transcendence, even the inner world of subjectivity itself, as Descartes's third meditation reveals. "Vous êtes toujours à découvert!" (132).

The content of this primordial form of transcendence, a transcendence that antecedes consciousness, and therefore knowledge and power, is ethical: "Tu ne tueras point," – thou shall not kill. "N'est-ce pas là, travers le visage d'autrui, la signification même de la parole de Dieu, inouïe signification du Transcendant qui d'emblée me concerne et m'éveille?" asks Levinas ("De l'éthique à l'exégèse" 129). This commandment, rather than narration (which, obviously, would render the other as Same, the Saying into a Said), constitutes the first movement toward human understanding, and thus, the beginning of language ("La Révélation dans la tradition juive" 144). Bursting in upon the immanence of subjectivity, the infinite operates as the supreme form of alterity, the giving over of meaning from outside subjectivity. As the face, that concrete event which does not give itself over to thematization, alterity pierces through the walls of order, and in diachrony presents and absents itself, giving to the subject the surplus of signification, yet eluding the grasp of intentionality. As such, in its overflowing of signification that stands alongside its evasion of comprehension, it assumes its role in the drama of signification, and demands that the subject not erase or efface its identity, given by Levinas in the paradigmatic statement "Tu ne tueras point." If we return to the problems of

ideal transcendentalism that Levinas analyzes in Husserl, the subject must in essence give himself over to the events within his world, that is, produce his own signs so as to "read" the experiences of his own world. Where Husserl would give this, unwittingly, as a sealed off world that reflects solely the ego, Levinas gives the hermeneutic necessary for "reading" this alterity brought to the subject by the other as "substitution." It must be stressed that for subjectivity to "read" his world, according to the theory of language and the phenomenological theory of hermeneutics being investigated here, the subject must give himself over to the structures of experience in his world. He must endow meanings which reflect himself if he is to truly "read" these experiences. Therefore, all experiences point to other experiences, just as language refers to itself laterally instead of along the finite measure of time. The subject must, it must be concluded, substitute previous experience within the instance of a new experience, all the while differentiating between them nonetheless. This would not mean that I simply replace the identity of the other with my own; I respond to the other's irruption of being by substituting myself, my experience, for this event. And what experience could possibly fulfill this role, when no experience precedes this event of the other? Here again, as with the formation of consciousness, we are at an impasse. The event of the other is the one that consciousness cannot get behind. It does not obey the dictates of duration, history, place, time—it is pre-experiential. It is that original instance of diachrony that seems to echo throughout every act of signification. Substitution here means that in this primordial event, the subject refers to the experience of itself as a distinct, unique event, that is, as subjectivity, to recognize the uniqueness of the other. But the subject's recognition of itself as a mode of subjectivity is consciousness, which, as has been shown, itself refers to the event of the other. Substitution, like consciousness, reveals itself to be 'after the event,' and thus not the origin of itself. Hence, before it can function in part as recognition of an experience, and

thus as a mode of knowing, it reveals itself to be obligated to the other. I am obligated, in debt to the other, before I am even a consciousness—ethics precedes ontology.

Subjectivity betrays its own beginnings within the other, but it also shows the necessary separation and freedom of its creation. It would seem that the opposite holds true, that consciousness as indebted is somehow dependent. Yet, as Descartes's meditation announces, the absence of the Infinite shows not only its freedom, but my own: the freedom to interpret my world as wholly my own. Separation and freedom, though they refer to two different notions, are inseparable here. One implies the other. Without separation and freedom, transcendence could not take place, for dependency would mean that meaning, essence, representation, and signification could not exist: these things only occur across distance, traversing across the chasms that separate beings within their own being. Infinity could not exist, for it would be one-dimensional, anonymous, and in itself not free. Hermeneutics, that is, reading, the mode of being Levinas shows as necessary to existence and experience, requires multiple dimensions, subjectivity and uniqueness, but most of all, freedom.

Chapter Five

Ethics and Reading: Before Being, Before the Text

The Risk of Subjectivity

At this point, it should be asked, could the hermeneutical freedom within Levinas's readings, the multiplicity of meanings to be released through all readings, the infinite significations that Levinas sees within the Talmud and the Torah, perhaps lead not to ethical exegesis but to irresponsible subjectivism? What prevents the latter from occurring, and what defines them both? Is not the philosophical work of Levinas, with its critique of the transcendental idealism of Husserl and the reign of the subject throughout the whole of Western philosophy— is this not now undermined by Levinas's hermeneutics which puts forth the freedom of subjectivity as necessary to any true reading of the Scriptures?

Levinas is acutely aware of such a risk, but notes that such a risk is necessary to gain access to truth ("Revelation" 134). To begin, subjectivity marks the unique place or "terrain" where "exteriority can appear" (133). As subjectivity, as a "unique 'of itself,'" it is the break out of the nothingness of the *il y a*, the "there is" that marks anonymous existence before any instance of consciousness, pure existence without the context of consciousness to make of it a significant event (133). Furthermore, it is the unique individual that the Torah reveals as the place wherein transcendence, or revelation, can take place, where the word "coming from elsewhere, from outside," can dwell in him who receives it (133). Levinas says that the human is that "to whom the word is said," as well as that "through whom there is Revelation" (145). He is the "place through which transcendence passes, even if he can be described as 'being-there,' or *Dasein*" (145). As such a

“place,” Levinas suggests that “the whole status of subjectivity and reason must perhaps be revised” (145). That, perhaps, defines Levinas’s works reasonably well. But, to continue, revelation, or transcendence, is the call to the unique self– not to anonymous “Being,” but to the unique individual that breaches the thematization of “essence.” It must be noted that God in the Scriptures, when he speaks, speaks directly to individuals, who later address the nations as a whole once the revelation has been received and given full meaning. As Levinas says, revelation is this “calling to the unique,” making it the “significance particular to the signifying of the Revelation” (133). Ironically, the full impact of this idea is that the multiplicity of persons reading the Scriptures locates the multiplicity of meanings within those Scriptures. The very multiplicity of persons is the “condition for the plenitude” of meanings within the Holy texts, “as if every person, through his uniqueness, were the guarantee of the revelation of a unique aspect of truth, and some of its points would never have been revealed if some people had been absent from mankind” (133). Not that truth is anonymous, but rather, “it is to suggest that the totality of the true is constituted from the contribution of multiple people,” that the “voice of Revelation” is “inflected” by each individual who welcomes it into significance (133-34). In short, “the multiplicity of irreducible people is necessary to the dimensions of meaning; the multiple meanings are multiple people” (134). This makes it possible not only for the Word to have the infinite number of meanings, but also for the “same truth” to traverse the span of time and place and find its signification within new contexts (134). As Levinas points out, the Law is carried by the Ark, and as such, is always “conditioned to be moved,” unattached to any particular place or time, yet true for all times (“Révélation” 163).

Midrash, the “exposition of meaning,” the forcing open of the “secret of transcendence,” unlocks the multiplicity inherent to the Scriptures, but these secrets are unique for every act of

Midrash (“On the Jewish Reading of Scriptures” 108). Levinas says that Jewish tradition traces back to the Revelation at Sinai “all that will be said in the way of expositions and lessons, objections and questions,” in fact, the “entire future accumulation of study of the Torah from the Decalogue to our own time,” including the questions asked by children in school (“Contempt for the Torah as Idolatry” 65). In his Talmudic reading “Le pacte,” Levinas gives this notion more concretely in the peculiar arithmetic of the numerous dimensions of meaning associated with the pact of the Covenant. The tractate Sotah 37a-37b that the reading features notes that with each commandment from the Decalogue there were “a benediction in general and a benediction in particular, likewise a curse in general and a curse in particular” (“The Pact” 68). In addition, there are four duties for each commandment, giving sixteen dimensions of meaning for each commandment. Also, the Talmud notes that things were similar at Sinai and at Moab, bringing “forty-eight covenants in connection with each commandment” (68). Further on, it is recorded in the Talmud that “there is not a single precept written in the Torah” which did not also have these forty-eight covenants (68). Along with this is the number of Israelites at Sinai, 603,550 (83). The number of Israelites times the number of covenants is 28,970,470, just to finish out the example. The most important thing is that this is not an infinite number: it denotes that in “every act of the Covenant more than six hundred thousand personal acts of responsibility are outlined” (84). This shows the Law of the Covenant not to be “an impersonal abstraction of a judicial act,” but instead as proof of “living links with all of those who adopt the Law” (84). Levinas adds to this number the seventy languages that the Torah lays claim to in the future, showing that “the Torah belongs to us all” (84). This Talmudic arithmetic shows the pact between each member of humanity to the other, yet it also serves to illustrate that the Scriptures have an infinite multiplicity of meanings, but each one of those meanings is accounted for, unique and

necessary for its fulfillment as Revelation. Therefore, every interpretation has been accounted for in the Holy History of the Torah. Such readings flow from people “in their uniqueness, each person capable of extracting from the signs meanings which each time are inimitable” (“On the Jewish Reading of Scriptures” 110). This reveals that one of the protections against subjectivity inherent to the Scriptures is that it already contains any meaning ascribed to it, finite yet inexhaustible significations which it brings forth. This also indicates the “ethical” element to reading the Scriptures in that these texts bring to the individual their own unique identity or signification, paralleling the identity of the other that eludes the grasp of totalization. Levinas remarks numerous times that the Torah denies the thematization of being because being is violence, and here we see one dimension of such resistance: the Torah as inspired, and inspiring, texts resists totalization, and demands exegesis insofar as it demands that the reader welcome its significations as it would welcome the other.

A Tradition of Renewal and Anti-Idolatry

This then leads us to confront the second way in which the Scriptures are protected from subjectivity, that of tradition. It would seem that for Judaism, “Revelation is left to the arbitrariness of subjective fantasies,” since it continues without “doctrinal authority,” leaving every letter of the Torah exposed to arbitration from every individual (“Revelation” 134). However, the call to exegesis is a “call to the person in his historical uniqueness,” making of course signification possible, but also bringing every interpretation into a historical unity (134). Despite the risk of subjectivity, (one could say in the face of such subjectivity), the various readings have kept a remarkable sense of unity given the diaspora of the Jewish readers over time and place. The various readings of the Torah that the Talmud records span centuries and continents, though of course not every reading or interpretation

has been documented. Even though the Scriptures allow for a wide range of interpretations, each one carries the responsibility of respectfully observing those that have come before it. Traditional reading of the Scriptures discriminates between a “personal originality brought to the reading,” and the “pure play of fantasy of amateurs,” even of “charlatans” (135). This distinction is brought about through the “necessary reference of the subjective to the historical continuity of the reading, and by the tradition of commentaries that cannot be ignored under the pretext that inspirations come to you directly from the text” (135). Levinas adds that any “renewal” of meaning, a term he borrows from rabbinical tradition, “cannot avoid these references,” simply for the reason that those various readings are part of the meaning that come to the individual (135). As Levinas notes, all readings are a way of “seeking the unsaid hidden within the said” (“The Nations and the Presence of Israel” 94). The unsaid and the said are very important yet very complex terms for Levinas’s works, especially in his second major philosophical work, Otherwise than Being, but here they at least indicate that the potential for meaning, the unsaid, does not just reside within the sacred texts themselves, but within the various readings that accompany them overtime, thus giving to them a “permanent renewal” (“As Old as the World?” 79). It is the way that the Scriptures recognize the unique individuality of each reader, of asserting “the very plurality of the people as an unavoidable moment of the signification of meaning . . . so that the infinite richness of what it does not say can be said or that the meaning of what it does say can be ‘renewed’” (“On the Jewish Reading” 110).

Such a tradition is ultimately open-ended, opened toward exteriority in a way, for it “does not impose its conclusions,” but demands an account of “what it sweeps along” (“Revelation” 136-37). Tradition for the Jewish Scriptures does not designate a deadening of meaning by dogma; in fact, the Law “lives through the multiplicity of person,” and therefore “finds dogma distasteful” (“The

Translation of the Scripture” 43). Levinas even points out the term “Min” in one of the Talmudic readings, “Min” being the rem for the Sadducee, “the Israelite who keeps only to the letter of the texts and refuses rabbinic exegesis” (“As Old as the World?” 81). The fundamentalization of the text would be its death, since it lives not by totalization but by opening the individual up to infinite realms of meaning through the Talmudic dialectic, its “open-ended discussion” (“Revelation” 139). Read strictly by the letter, its lessons would become mere idolatry. Levinas writes that the Torah “protects itself from eventual idolatry” by the renewal “through constant exegesis– and exegesis of that exegesis” (“Contempt for the Torah as Idolatry” 59). Levinas even refers to the Torah as “the antithesis of idolatry . . . the book of anti-idolatry” (58). By its very essence as a book, says Levinas, the Talmud wards off idolatry “by its very writing, signifying precisely prescription and by the permanent reading it calls for . . . interpretation and reinterpretation (58). Thus, it is also as a book “foreign to any blind commitment that might think itself virtuous because of its decisiveness and stubbornness” (58). A book not open to discussion and extension through the act of discourse would not be a living text as the Scriptures are, and it would be but a collection of “histories and anecdotes” (65). The “prophecy of persons and the genius of a people,” as well as their “message for all,” would be silent and distant (65).

Another important element to the notion of tradition, which is so important in keeping the Torah existing as a living text, is touched upon by Hans-Georg Gadamer in his discussion of the legitimacy of authority in Truth and Method. Gadamer claims that to do “justice to man’s finite, historical mode of being,” the notion of “legitimate prejudices” must be taken up (Truth and Method 246). He points to the enlightenment for discrediting prejudice as a “source of error,” as Descartes puts it in his Meditations. “Overhastiness” may result in the erroneous application of reason,

according to Descartes, but “authority,” or tradition, leads one to refuse to even use reason (246). This, as Gadamer points out, is the root of the antithesis between reason and authority, the latter being regarded as a “false prejudice” taken without reflection or examination (246). As a result, the Reformation gave rise to a “flourishing hermeneutics” designed to “teach the right use of reason” for fully understanding religious texts, as well as to “safeguard the reasonable meaning of a text against all” (246). However, as Gadamer says, there came a curious double standard with the authority of reason:

That the prejudices that determine what I think are due to my own narrowness of vision is a judgment that is made from the standpoint of their dissolution and illumination and holds only of unjustified prejudices. If, contrariwise, there are justified prejudices productive of knowledge, then we are back with the problem of authority. (247)

Reason works against that which is unreasonable, e.g., illusion and “unjustified prejudice,” but against something that is reasonable, say “justified prejudices,” reason can only assert itself as yet another authority, demanding that it be taken into account before all judgments and steps toward knowledge. The real problem is that the way authority and tradition has come to be regarded as a result of the revolutions of the enlightenment. It has been assumed that authority and tradition meant “blind obedience” for the individual, “but this is not the essence of authority” as Gadamer points out (248). Authority is based “not on the subjection and abdication of reason, but on recognition and knowledge,” a knowledge, Gadamer adds, “that the other is superior to oneself in judgment and insight and that for this reason his judgment takes precedence, i.e., it has priority over one’s own (248). Most of the time this subjection is due not to the fact that the individual is subsumed under an extension of power, as many would believe, and therefore coerced into recognizing authority; rather, it is due to the fact that authority “cannot actually be bestowed, but is acquired and must be

acquired, if someone else is to lay claim to it” (248). Authority hinges upon “recognition,” and is therefore “an act of reason itself, which, aware of its own limitations, accepts that others have better understanding” (248). The recognition of authority ultimately pertains not to obedience, but to knowledge, and is thus an act of freedom and reason, one that acknowledges that there is another who has “a wider view of things and is better informed” (248). Finally, Gadamer’s investigation reveals that tradition is “constantly an element of freedom and of history itself,” concluding that tradition persists not because of “the inertia of what once existed,” but because of the free choice of those who recognize its authority and knowledge (250). Tradition “needs to be affirmed, embraced, cultivated,” because it is in essence “preservation,” which, of course, is an “act of reason” (250). Even in the face of revolution and dramatic shifts, “far more of the old is preserved,” than is ever taken into account, combining “with the new to create a new value” (250).

Gadamer’s assessment of tradition more than complements the approach of Levinas to the sacred texts. They in fact seem to share the judgment that reason does accept its limitations, and recognizes that it is not the end of all discourse, but the certainly the beginning. But there is also a warmer regard from both for authority and tradition, in that they both see the relationship of the individual to tradition as one based on reasonable choice. The dogma of authority and tradition does not come into criticism here precisely because the individual who would accept that tradition and authority holding such dogma would not be coerced or forced beyond his will. His would be a free choice, stemming from reason and reflection. This choice, however, is fundamentally a choice of deferment of the self; in the language of Levinas, I let the other speak fully and have authority on the matter at hand, out of a recognition that he contains more than I can. The other has that wider range of view, and more knowledge than I can bring. All of this is done not out of power, or self-

abnegating obeisance, but out of recognition, a knowledge of the situation, and an identification of height between us. This is much the same way that Levinas sees the student of the Talmud, as one who approaches the Talmud not as a relic but as an authority, as a body of knowledge. He writes that “One who interprets the Torah in a sense contrary to the traditional rules of conduct takes the Torah as a product of culture available for intellectual jousting matches, drawing room amusement, ‘purely theoretical’ views devoid of responsibility” (“Contempt” 62). Such a “grasping” of meaning is the complete opposite of the reader of the Talmud who, like the individual who chooses the knowledge of authority, allows himself to be put into question, and comes to it accepting that it has something worthy to say. Also, the approach to authority and tradition registers a desire to go beyond one’s given state, to acquire either knowledge or experience which would bring to oneself more than could be gained alone. As Levinas has said of the reader of the Scriptures that he seeks out the “possibilities and risks of a thought transcending the given” (“The Translation of the Scripture” 51). Finally, the transmission of the multiplicity of meanings by the traditional reading of the sacred texts is wholly an ethical act, for in essence it is preservation, a guarding of the past to make sure that the present does not close itself off to the fulness of signification. It is a way of preserving the Saying within the Said, a way of recognizing that meaning comes from beyond, transcending the given of the context into which it enters, which is the uniqueness of the subject. Levinas says of language and the book arising from language, that they are “phenomenology, the ‘staging’ in which the abstract is made concrete” (Beyond the Verse xii).

The Subject of the Book

Levinas holds that “writing is always prescriptive and ethical,” because in its primal form, writing and language, Derrida’s distinction aside, are the echoes of the initial contact with infinity (xii). They resonate with the “Word of God which commands me and vows me to the other,” a word that is “holy writing before being sacred text” (xii). Such a word, never reconstituted in the present yet always heard as if it could never enter into the past, founds the “break, in the being that I am, of my good conscience of being-there. I hear it as my allegiance to the other” (xii). It immediately initiates the self-questioning that underlies all reason, disrupts the “self-care” which is “essential to the *esse* of beings” (xi). It is the foundation of subjectivity, forming its primal, transcendental structure. Levinas concludes, “My condition— or my uncondition— is my relation to books. It is the very movement-towards-God” (xii).

Language for Levinas reveals that subjectivity is at all times the coordination with the other. As he has said of Husserl’s philosophy, “the presence of the subject to transcendental things is the very definition of consciousness” (“The Ruin of Representation” 114). “The reader,” says Levinas of the student of the Talmud, “is a scribe,” being the location where meaning can be inscribed into the concreteness of existence (“Revelation” 133). This definition of the reader, he adds, “provides us with the first indication of what we might call the ‘status’ of the Revelation: its word coming from elsewhere, from outside, and simultaneously dwelling in the person who receives it” (133). Accordingly, the subject, as far as it is marked by the diachrony of the infinite, continually asks of the past meanings contained within the Torah “questions based on what the Torah will mean tomorrow” (“Contempt” 66). This is yet another way of understanding that the subject welcomes meaning into its gaze by “reading” the possibilities presented to it, but where Heidegger asserted that

these possibilities signified a “being-with” structure, Levinas puts forth these possibilities as always signifying “for-the-other,” future possibilities, yes, but only so as to welcome meaning. Levinas sees the structural similarities operating within the hermeneutics employed for reading a text as within the hermeneutics that engage the other. Thus the relationship between the ego and the other is as it is between reader and text: not a “dogmatic legislation” of meaning in one direction, but the movement of “reciprocal exchange,” which for the subject means substitution (“For a Place in the Bible” 20). Identity and meaning come into the present, bursting in, overthrowing any attempts at totalization, yet what keeps them always anew is the adumbration of future possible meanings. With this, the subject is beholden to the other, to the outside, to the fount of meaning and signification which is alterity; he is hostage to the other, and therefore, to transcendence itself. Consciousness is but the ever continuing answer to the demand for hermeneutics from exteriority. Levinas asks, “is not reading a way of inhabiting?” inferring that the book is “a form of living space” (“Revelation” 130).

It is in this sense, too, that Israel is a people of the Book, and that its relation to the Revelation is unique of its kind. Its actual land is based on the Revelation. Its nostalgia for the land is fed on texts. It derives nothing from belonging in some way to a particular piece of soil. (130)

As a people of the Book, the Israelites take up the individual as the locus of transcendence and therefore of meaning. Here we come upon another element of Levinas’s contention with Heidegger who repeatedly praised the common *volk* of the land. Edith Wyschogrod indicates that Levinas saw the correlation between the hermeneutics of the neuter *Sein* that Heidegger focused his works upon and the “call of blood and soil” that Heidegger saw as a mode of authentic existence (Wyschogrod 15). “The injunction to heed the voice of being,” she writes, “opened for Levinas the possibility for human existence to be lived as pagan existence” (15). As he says, the feature of “peasant

enrootedness” is not authentic being, but an existence which orients all signification toward its own “place in the sun, its ground, its *site*” (“Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity” 52). Israel, for Levinas, manages to stay beyond the realm of blood and soil by existing within Holy History, the messianic time that welcomes God’s arrival into human history, which is but the reign of justice and ethics.

Ethics and Revelation: The Responsible Reader

Levinas remarks again and again that the meaning of the Scriptures requires not the whole of tradition alone, but the uniqueness of the individual reader who engages that tradition, for the individual is the location of Revelation. He writes that the “extra-ordinary structure of the inspired texts if the Holy Scriptures is even more remarkable in that their reader is called upon not only in the good *common* sense of him being open to ‘information,’ but in the inimitable– and logically imperceptible– uniqueness of his person, and, as it were, of his own genius” (Beyond the Verse xiii). The reader of the Scriptures is the “unique ‘terrain’ in which exteriority can appear” (“Revelation” 133). “The Revelation as calling to the unique within me is the significance particular to the signifying of the Revelation,” says Levinas, showing that “every person, through his uniqueness,” can be said to be the “guarantee of the revelation of a unique aspect of truth” (133). It would suggest even further that “some of its points would never have been revealed if some people had been absent from mankind” (133). Truth, however, is far from anonymous, as the Talmud attests with its catalog of names and titles. To the contrary, “it is to suggest that the totality of the true is constituted from the contribution of multiple people: the uniqueness of each act of listening carrying the secret of the text” (133). Yet, how is this exactly tied to ethics? Is it that one has a responsibility to welcome meaning, or does the structure of ethical reading originate earlier?

Levinas puts forth the simple yet profound thesis that “the breakup of essence is ethics,” where essence recalls the thematization or totalization of meaning that transforms the Other into the Same (Otherwise than Being 14). “This breakup of essence” Levinas calls a “breakup of identity,” a “changing of being into signification” which is but “substitution, is the subject’s subjectivity or its subjection to everything, its susceptibility, its vulnerability, that is, its sensibility” (14). Subjectivity as exposure, as the simultaneous receiving and giving of signification, as originating in transcendence—this shows to Levinas that “Goodness gives to subjectivity its irreducible signification” (18). The opposite, then, would be the evil of alienating oneself by alienating signification from the event which signifies it, or in other words, to reduce the meaning of the other to the Same. It would be the transgression of the basic commandment, “Thou shalt not kill.” As Levinas has stated, the other is the only thing in my world I can murder, which means that the other bears its own meaning which I am responsible for, being that I myself am the bearer of another subject. Thus, I am hostage, but a hostage of free, reasonable choice— or, of an ethical choice. As such, my responsibility is infinite since it is infinitely signified— like Jonah, I can find no corner of the earth wherein I may hide: “We are straightaway within being” (“Reflections on Phenomenological ‘Technique’” 97). Signification is the “responsibility of the hostage,” and “infinite responsibility” (147). Thus, “my very uniqueness lies in the responsibility for the other man” (“Revelation” 142). My obedience comes through the “impossibility of shying away; through it my ‘self’ is unique” (142). “To be free,” writes Levinas “is to do only what no one else can do in my place. To obey the Most-High is to be free” (142). Responsibility means separation, and separation means a “reversal of the essence of being” (“Temptation” 49). The subject is never merely “for-itself,” but by its very essence as a separated consciousness it is “for others” (“As Old as the World?” 85). The history of the Israelites reflects this

strange structure of subjectivity, its gift of infinite giving, its ritual and return of free expression and signification, for the history of Israel in a sense “begins with an act of liberation,” but before Israel can be welcomed into its promised land, it must accept the covenant with God at Sinai.

The covenant with God appears as the concrete realization of the initial “pact” that subjectivity has with the other. Levinas compares the subject to the “difficult freedom” which is that “freedom of the Law . . . a freedom of responsibilities” (“Temptation” 37). “The teaching, which the Torah is,” says Levinas, “cannot come to the human being as a result of a choice. That which must be received in order to make freedom of choice possible cannot have been chosen, unless after the fact” (37). That “teaching” which the Torah recalls is the initiation into one’s own consciousness from transcendence itself, concretely realized, and realized in the only way possible, through the other. Levinas asks, “Wouldn’t Revelation be precisely a reminder of this consent prior to freedom and non-freedom?” (37). Thus, Revelation conditions Reason; the unique identity of the other signifies in itself the uniqueness of the subject which it confronts (37). This then is the message in Levinas’s statement that “the meaning of being, the meaning of creation, is to realize the Torah”: not that the Torah should define one’s existence after the fact, but that what defines existence also defines the Torah (41). That “act by which the Israelites accept the Torah is the act which gives meaning to reality” (41). In the Talmudic reading “The Temptation of Temptation,” Levinas gives the content and significance of this act of acceptance by the Israelites as a foil for the freedom and “adventure” of being which defines the subject for the West. The Talmudic tractate, Shabbath 88a to 88b, records the insight of Rav Simai, who says that when the Israelites received their covenant, “600,000 angels came down and attached two crowns to each Israelite, one for the doing, the other for the hearing (30). The order, doing before hearing, is not accidental, for it signifies something deeper. Levinas

notes that the “Jewish tradition has taken pleasure” in inverting the “normal order, where hearing precedes doing” (42). Levinas refers to Martin Buber’s explanation of this statement as saying that the Israelites must “do *in order* to understand” (42). But Levinas claims that “we must look further,” for the question is not to transform action into a mode of understanding but to praise a mode of knowing, which reveals the deep structure of subjectivity,” that structure represented by the notion of “*Temimut*,” or תמימות, which may mean either innocence, or unanimity, but Levinas gains a deeper meaning from the word because of the context in which it appears in the featured Talmudic tractate (42). He does so to illustrate that the “apparently upside-down order is, on the contrary, fundamental” (42). *Temimut* shows the “integrity” that “expresses itself in the ‘We will do’ preceding the ‘We will hear’” (43). It shows that the “adherence to the good” can only come before any “choice between good and evil” (43). Thus an integrity to the allegiance to the good comes before any choice can be made between good and evil—innocence and integrity defines the subject for Levinas. “This adherence,” he continues,

is incompatible with any position beyond or above the good, whether it be the immoralism of aesthetes or politicians or the supra-moralism of the religious, all that moral extraterritoriality opened up by the temptation of temptation. This undoubtedly indicates that the doing which is at stake here is not simply *praxis* as opposed to theory but a way of *actualizing without beginning with the possible*, of knowing without examining, of placing oneself beyond violence without this being the privilege of a free choice. A pact with good would exist, preceding the alternative of good and evil. (43)

Edith Wyschogrod has argued in a similar way the contention between Levinas and Heidegger. She says that Levinas views Heidegger’s notion of being is constituted solely by power (Wyschogrod 13). Thus, “Being is the power of being” (13).

If this is the case, power must be defined in a way other than by reference to the act, for when potentiality passes into act, its existence is its realization; it loses its inexistence

the very power that made it a possibility. Levinas argues from the premise that power belongs to potentiality and not to act. Act can never express the power of being, since act is itself a loss of power, the power of potentiality. (13-14)

This gets to the heart of the juncture between philosophy and religion for Levinas, for once potentiality passes into act, into signification, power shifts to the subject. Descartes's investigations into the very idea of infinity bear this out, for he touches upon the fact that he may doubt anything, even the existence of God himself, because the power of the subject is so nearly infinite it seems as though it were actually the source for those infinite possibilities. Levinas says of the subject that it is "an origin and commencement, a power" (Totality 281). However, as Descartes has to admit, he cannot essentially get beyond the power of subjectivity to expose the origin of that power, showing to him that he is not the source for that power or for those possibilities. Once potentiality passes into act, the subject holds forth the real power for signification, but within reflection, within consciousness, he thematizes the very potentiality he is looking back upon. As thematized, it is no longer infinite in possibility. Here is the matter of the Saying and of the Said, the former being that potentiality, the latter being that act which assumes its power through signification. Levinas writes that "the correlation of the saying and the said, that is, the subordination of the saying to the said, to the linguistic and to ontology, is the price that manifestation demands" (Otherwise than Being 6). "Language," he explains, "permits us to utter, be it by betrayal, this *outside of being*, this *ex-ception* to being, as though being's other were an event of being" (6). Thus, the notion of *Temimut* shows that doing before hearing corresponds to the potentiality of meaning, the infinite, that the subject must welcome into manifestation, "substituting" itself in order that the signification can be "read." "In its *being*," says Levinas, "subjectivity undoes essence [as thematization or ontology] by substituting itself for another" (13). This welcoming, this substituting, keeps such potential intact only within an ethical

stance by the subject, that “uprightness” that is the “movement toward the other which does not come back to its point of origin” (“Temptation” 48).

Separation and Transcendence: The Redemption of Language

Inasmuch as Levinas directs his critique at the subjectivity of the West, his work, especially his Talmudic readings, stresses its singularity as the pivotal role in the drama of signification. Signification as it is revealed by Levinas can be rightly called a drama because its principal function is not as has been asserted, that of representation. Instead, it comes to be seen within Levinas as the way by which consciousness comes to know and accept itself, to function within its world, and to gain meaning in more than just the gnoseological dimension. In his earliest writings, such as those on the works of Heidegger and Husserl, he claims that “Dasein must authentically possess itself in order that it may be lost” within the fallenness of everyday, inauthentic being (“Martin Heidegger” 25). Similarly, the subject must have been founded by transcendence for it to have lost itself within its own totality. Transcendence in a way discovers the individual, actualizes him through his own concrete existence. Man is “the irruption of God into being,” yet also the “explosion of being towards God”; in any instance, he is the “rupture of being which produces the act of giving” (“Revelation” 142). This inimitable location of the break of being that is the subject helps define the idea of “election” that Levinas sees within the Talmud. On the surface it is that the Jews are the chosen people, but Levinas shows that it also denotes the “great responsibilities” that come with the ethical commands of the Torah—election denotes that “indisputable summons which gives life to ethics” (142). It also reveals that the summons singles out the individual by making him responsible (142). His “exit from being” happens before he can choose to do anything, for the “exit from being”

occurs only where there is choice, freedom, and separation (“Temptation” 49). “The personal form of being,” says Levinas, that “ego-ness,” is but the “destruction of the crust of being” (49). Yet, freedom is not the origin for the subject: “To say that the person begins in freedom, that freedom is the first causality and that the first cause is nobody, is to close one’s eyes to the secret of the ego” (49). Furthermore, the subject is “obligated before all commitment” (“The Name of God” 125). Obedience is the very defining element of the conscious (“And God Created Woman” 166). To even assume that the “prior alliance” with the other is “freely chosen” is to reason “as though the ego had witnessed the creation of the world,” as though “the world had emerged out of its free will” (“Temptation” 49). Levinas dismisses this as the “presumptuousness of the philosopher,” and points to the story of Job as the “reproach” that the Torah makes of such totalization (49). Revelation is commandment, which subjugates the listener, yet to even have the idea of Infinity, “it is necessary to exist as separated” (Totality 79). Levinas seems to have led the investigation into subjectivity into an impasse, but as was given earlier, this is true only if the idea of subjectivity is recuperated within language; the impasse comes only when one tries to get behind the origin of the subject. But, and this is the real issue at the heart of election, our freedom obligates us to remain within the act of signification, and forever remain just beyond that potentiality, that infinite, which inaugurates the act. “Separation and transcendence” unite to “form the fabric of being itself,” according to Levinas, but they “first come together” in the act of discourse (Totality 81).

Levinas gives many definitions of Revelation, the event of transcendence, and one of those definitions is discourse (Totality 77). He elaborates by saying that “in order to welcome revelation a being apt for this role of interlocutor, a separated being, is required” (77). As discourse, it is a “constant hermeneutics of the Word” (“Revelation” 138). Levinas’s philosophical works lay things

out more directly concerning the real function of language within the act of transcendence. For example, we are told that discourse “is the production of meaning,” and “an original relation with exterior being” (66). Discourse is thus the way by which meaning is produced, by its being “said and taught by presence” (66). Presence, of course, implies a separation since distance is traversed by the subject by bringing things into its presence, into its grasp. Language, which is for Levinas another way to talk about discourse, “maintains the other” through its “expressive function” (73). Precisely by instituting a relation to that which is exterior, that which is separate, language and discourse make possible “the *revelation* of the other” (73). They make things like universality and generality possible; such things are necessary for language and discourse to make things present, to traverse distance, and to allow meaning to transcend and burst into being in the first place. Language, discourse, and we can add at this point, consciousness itself, all presuppose a plurality, a multiplicity awaiting the giving of meaning from the discursive subject (73). Even the *cogito*, long held as the mark of alienation for the subject in the West, the bare “I think,” is “sociality” (“Contempt for the Torah” 66). Hence, whenever subjectivity is “lost” within its totality, or whenever *Dasein* is “lost” within its fallen world of everyday Being, it is lost within language, and thus lost among its own signs of redemption. But the language does not engage itself within a true notion of discourse; it is marking out only familiar territory, setting forth on a constant return to the Same, enjoining in an adventure that risks nothing but the temptation of temptation. For it is the very structure of language itself which bears the redemption of language. As consciousness, phenomenology has taught, the subject is created by language; and as Levinas reveals, the subject is thus always the bearer of yet another subject. The conclusion is that the call for exegesis that the Torah commands is but the echo of the ethical command from the other, signified through the face, “Thou shalt not kill,” which, it must be repeated,

denotes the welcoming of meaning from the other, letting him stand within his own identity. As Levinas writes, “responsibility” is but the “essence of language” (“Toward the Other” 21).

Reason and Vigilance: Reading Ethics as “For-the-Other”

Levinas is perhaps so readily associated with ethics that not much is made of the sound, logical principles upon which they are based, as if his notion of ethics were but the *deus ex machina* proposed at the end of a philosophical discussion to redeem the thinker from the impasse to which his logic had led him—a synthesis of disparate tendencies, a determination that the redemption of our fallen, finite world lies in the future, or within the individual even if he but withdraws into himself, and so on. It would seem, then, that ethics is but the ecstatic state one is forced to enter once it is realized just how desperate our situation really is. But this is very much like the mistaken notions of the enlightenment that Gadamer investigated, the ones that condemned the allegiance with tradition and authority as a forswearing of individual reason. But as was shown by Gadamer, such a choice is reasonable, free and, ultimately, responsible. Very much the same could be said for the act of transcendence as Levinas regards it. He seeks to “justify” this notion, saying that “the openness to transcendence, as it appears in ethics, does not mean the loss of rationality, that which gives significance to meaning” (“Revelation” 148). Here he discusses the project of “rational theology,” a “theology of being where the rational is equated with the identity of the Same, suggested by the firmness or positivity of the firm ground beneath the sun” (148). As terra firma, rationality belongs more to that “ontological adventure” Levinas criticizes throughout his works. (148). “The notion of subjectivity coinciding with the identity of the Same and its rationality,” he adds, “meant the connection with the world’s diversity and the unity of an order which left nothing outside” (148).

This was “an order produced or reproduced by the supreme act of Synthesis” (148). Opposed to this would be the “passive subject,” which “in the heteronomy of its responsibility for the other,” seems wholly irrational and, more importantly, incongruous to the unity of the rationally founded world (148). That subject which would not “return to itself, which does not join up again in order to settle, triumphantly, into the absolute repose of the earth beneath the vault of heaven, is unfavourably treated as a product of Romantic subjectivism” (148-49). Lacking the ease and repose of rationality, such a subject would seem to be “a privation— a pure insufficiency of identity, a mark of self-inequality” (149).

However, Levinas speculates on whether or not “Revelation does not precisely restore the thought of inequality, difference, and irreducible alterity which is ‘uncontainable’ in gnoseological intentionality; the thought which is not knowledge but which, overflowing knowledge, is in relation with the Infinite or God” (149). This would mean that “intentionality, in its noetic and noematic correlation . . . is not, on the contrary, an insufficient psyche, one that is more impoverished than the question which, in its purity, is directed towards the other” (149). He concludes by reflecting even further on revelation as discourse, on whether or not such “seeking, desire, and questioning, far from carrying within themselves the emptiness of need, are not the explosion of the ‘more in the less’ that Descartes called the idea of the Infinite, a psyche that is more awake than the psyche of intentionality and the knowledge adequate to its object” (149). These words parallel what Levinas has said about reason consisting “not in securing for man a foundation and powers,” as it does in the reign of the Same within a totality; instead, it exists to put man “in question,” and even further, “inviting him to justice” (Totality 88). “Revelation,” as it is put forth within the Scriptures, according to Levinas, is not simply the will of God revealing itself to individuals, but more the echo of the primary encounter

with the infinite, for it “denounces the figure of the Same and of knowledge in their claim to be the only place of signification” (“Revelation” 150). Not existing purely within oneself is the modality of ethics being discussed here, one that can occur only through an “awakening by the Other” (150). Awakening or vigilance comes to denote the ethical modality of existing that the Torah demands, whether it seeks out interpretation or justice. It is that mode of being of Abraham, eagerly seeking out the stranger and welcoming him into his tent, which significantly, is always described as open on all sides.

Genesis 18, to which this image of Abraham refers, shows Abraham welcoming three strangers passing by. Curiously, just before rushing out to wash their feet and offer them rest, Abraham begs the Lord, “pass not away, I pray thee” (Gen. 18:3). This would be enough, it seems, to support Levinas’s claim that God is known through the stranger, but the verses go on to have the Lord proclaim that Abraham “shall surely become a great and mighty nation” (Gen. 18:18). For the hospitality given to strangers to lead to the establishment of a nation reveals the full signification of the ethical act: it establishes the reign of God. As Levinas says, “God’s reign depends on me. God has subordinated his efficacy—his association with the real and the very presence of the real—to my mer or demerit” (“Judaism and Kenosis” 126). Thus, God “reigns only by the intermediary of an ethical order, an order in which one being *is answerable for another* (emphasis added) (126). The true “ethical meaning of human activity” depends upon “its conformity with God’s order” as it is given forth in the Torah” (126). The “transgression of that order,” adds Levinas, “has a significance which transcends . . . the natural effects of the act” (126). The world exists as justified solely “through the human enterprise” because only the human can establish justice (126). Levinas adds, “the human is the possibility of a being-for-the-other. That possibility is the justification of all

existing” (126). Hence, only the ethical act reveals the justification for language, for the way that the subject exists, which is through discourse. The true importance of the individual not just for establishing meaning but for establishing the place where such meaning can come into existence is seen in the unlimited power that the subject bears within the act of signification: “More important than God’s omnipotence is the subordination of that power to man’s ethical consent” (126). If God is effaced, it is to establish the “reconciliation of men” (“The Name of God” 123). If man is the place through which transcendence passes, he is also the place through which such transcendence can have meaning and justification, for he exists within the concrete (“Revelation” 145). Thus the establishment of meaning can only be just outside of the abstract, that is, within the concrete. The Torah contains transcendental meaning only insofar as it contains the discourse of men, and bears witness to the concrete exigencies of their lives.

For the Talmud, “religious experience” can only really be a “moral experience” (“Toward the Other” 15). These two are not mere features of the spiritual life; the ethical is solely “that element in which religious transcendence can have a meaning” (“The Will of God” 66). The Talmudic “science,” as Levinas puts it, is the “continual unfolding of the ethical order” (“Ethics and Spirit” 6). Acceptance of the Torah is the acceptance of universal justice, for it is the acceptance ultimately of a watchful reason, of a “call for absolute vigilance,” of a discourse that awaits the other’s manifestation not as the opportunity for conquest and subjection, but for the opportunity to be fulfilled and justified oneself, to establish the redemption of one’s own consciousness. It is also the acceptance of infinite obligation, for as the diachrony of signifies attests, meaning is always seen as “ever to come,” in a sense. Within each moment of the Said, the Saying awaits its own future arrival, commands it from the subject, who must open himself up, like the sides of Abraham’s tent, to

welcome its manifestation. Levinas, in his preface to Du sacré au saint, says that the discourse inherent to the Talmud is an “état de veille” (8). Even more, it takes “le sens éthique” as the ultimate “intelligibilité” and signification of the human (10).

One could not be hard pressed to see the ethical as the essential feature in the distinct Talmudic tractates which Levinas uses for his readings. Like his philosophy, all discussion in the Talmudic readings lead up to the ethical impact or significance that human action has for the other. But one would have a difficult time locating specific ethical acts, such as feeding the hungry, clothing the poor, rendering justice to victims of cruelty. He hints at one discussing the inclusion of proper working hours that should be instituted according to Talmud; of this notion, he asks if there “isn’t a certain connection between the establishment of working hours and the love of God” (“Judaism and Revolution” 103). He surmises that “there are not many other ways to love God than to establish [just] working hours” (103). The essential qualities of the ethical within the Talmud that Levinas features in his readings have more to do with how the subject is oriented toward his world, how he welcomes transcendence, welcomes the other. In short, they designate not the content or even form of the ethical, but rather the subject which is open toward discourse and toward transcendence, which are, as we have seen, one and the same.

For example, there is Abraham awaiting strangers in his tent, obviously. But Abraham is also featured in the Talmudic reading “Who Is One-Self?”, where his simple claim that he is but dust and ashes is debated among the scholars recorded in this tractate. Levinas notes that these simple words reveal self-denial, which is a form of regarding the other. There is also the discussion of the Sanhedrin in “As Old as the World?”, the court which is formed by a semi-circle, denoting two things. First, that they were face to face, so that the “interpersonal relationship” was “never suspended,” but

also because justice cannot take place outside of this relationship (“As Old as the World?” 72). Second, the semi-circle showed their orientation to transcendence: “the judges who sit on the court remain open to the outside world when they discuss the cases submitted to their jurisdiction or when they give their verdict”(72). Transcendence lies at the heart of this court, allowing for the “penetration of the divine” into the acts of justice (“The Will of God” 74).

One example with perhaps the strongest relevance to the ethical act is given in the reading “Cities of Refuge,” which focuses on how cities of refuge are to be constructed. Levinas explains that the city of refuge would house those who are guilty yet innocent, say those who commit crimes unwittingly, like accidentally killing someone from a loose axe-head that a wood-cutter would use. Such a person would, of course, be innocent, but the relatives of the victim have the right to seek vengeance. “The law of Moses designates cities of refuge where the manslayer takes refuge or is exiled,” explains Levinas (“Cities of Refuge” 39). The ethical implications are obvious, but it is important to note that both victim and “manslayer” are given equal weight in the distribution of justice. Even further, Levinas notes that “there is no other access to salvation than that which passes through the dwelling place of men. That is the fundamental symbolism attached to this city” (38). Such dwelling, it should be seen, recalls the “dwelling” of being, and the welcoming of the other into his own signification through the gift of substitution, which for Levinas is the essential structure of the ethical.

To return to the paradigm of Abraham, he introduces the notion of self-denial, and care for the other, and in that sense, establishes the nation of Israel, which as has been shown is but a paradigm itself for the collection of men conscious of their obligation to each other, “elected,” if you will, to solicit the full signification of the religious within the ethical. The same ethical orientation to

the other brought about by self-denial is seen in the nazirite, those young Jews who go through a ritual of purification and self-denial. They refuse wine and any product of the vine; they also, curiously, refuse to cut their hair. Levinas explains that the prohibition against products of the vine reveals that “drunkenness is illusion, the disappearance of the problem, an artificial enthusiasm, and the nazirite does not wish to be deceived, or to be relieved of the weight of existence” (“The Youth of Israel” 123). No doubt this could also denote the Western subject drunk in its own being or its own totality. Additionally, letting the hair grow is, says Levinas, a way of being “straightforward,” of existing without the added distraction of vanity and indulgence, “a way of being ‘without a mirror,’” a mode of “anti-narcissism” (124). It could also designate the refusal to be imbibed with oneself, just as with Narcissus. There are two specific nazirites referred to by the Mishna excerpt from the Talmud here, Simeon the Just and Samson. The Gemara goes on to illuminate, albeit in a quite esoteric way, what Levinas discusses regarding self-denial, or “dis-interestedness,” as it is redefined by his reading (127). This dis-interestedness opposes “the *essence* of a being, which essence is precisely always a persistence in essence, the return of essence upon itself” (127). Next is the example of Samson, that hero most remember from bible classes, recast here as a nazirite by Rabbi Nehorai in this tractate. He reasons that since the word “razor” or “morah” was uttered by the Bible for both, it must mean that both were nazirites. From this insight, the vow of the nazirite comes to echo the covenant in which the Israelites do before they hear, and are chosen by the good before they can choose it. An angel of the Lord declares to Samson’s mother that no razor shall touch his head after he is born, showing that he is a “nazirite engaged without having made a personal decision” (128). Samson is thus “a nazirite by divine will” (128). Levinas sets this interpretation of Samson against the orientation of Western subjectivity: “Nothing is more scandalous to a consciousness for

which everything must begin in a free act and for which *self-consciousness, completing consciousness*, is supreme freedom” (emphasis added) (128). This notion of self-consciousness as the completion of consciousness for the West contrasts the nazirite, whose recognition of himself as always being “not-yet-complete,” in that his infinite obligation to be “for-the-other” is never completed.

Above all else, the ethical situation in the sacred texts is the orientation of subjectivity to transcendence. Levinas reads the Talmud with an eye to elucidating the ethical possibilities intrinsic to the texts. He takes up these situations “as if the possibility of the ethical good, above and beyond the difference between natural good and evil deeds, were the opening to transcendence and the source of religious language” (“On Religious Language” 92). Even that ethical command “Thou shalt not kill” relates to transcendence, for it is, “through the face of Others, the very significance of the word of God, the unheard of significance of the Transcendent that immediately concerns and awakens me” (“From Ethics to Exegesis” 111). Vigilance, the ethical stance of the awakened subject, awaiting the manifestation of alterity, anxious to unfold the possibilities of the other as a service to the other—this, then, is the ethical subject of the Talmud, one standing ready to accept the command for ethical exegesis. “From the outset,” says Levinas,

Jewish revelation is commandment, and piety is obedience to it. But an obedience which, while accepting practical decrees, does not stop the dialectic called upon to determine them. This dialectic continues and is valid by itself in its style of open-ended discussion. (“Revelation” 139)

Chapter Six

Conclusion: Holy History and Messianic Politics

“To the Extent that Messianic Times Are Often Designated as the Epoch of Conclusions”

These words are from Levinas's essay "Revelation in the Jewish Tradition," turning upon the idea of concluding that which is to remain essentially open: "The religious act of listening to the revealed word is thus identified with the discussion whose open-endedness is desired with all the audacity of its problematics. To the extent that . . ." (138). That epoch of conclusion would designate not only the end of history, but also the start of the earthly reign of the messiah and the concrete institution of divine justice. But for Levinas's Talmudic readings in particular and his overall work in general, the notion of the messiah presents especially notable possibilities once it is reckoned within his notions of subjectivity.

Diachrony, as has been shown, defines the peculiar double movement of signification, since it is both a coming into meaning as the mode of signifying, and a moving away as meaning eludes the grasp of the individual subject across the distance of time. Meaning never ceases to come, and at the same time it is never fully arriving. Anchored in time, the subject must gather up its experiences in memory, but the present affords only one "aspect" of experience, within a specific time and place, never the same from moment to moment. Thus, experience bears the mark of diachrony, for full signification never occurs within the present. Inasmuch as language underscores the way in which consciousness exists within its world, consciousness likewise bears the mark of diachrony. Consciousness always is the bearer of another subject, which means essentially that it is always vigilant for the transcendence of the infinite. As Levinas's phenomenological investigations have

shown, the subject may know that it is engrossed within finitude, but it also is cognizant of the surplus of meaning that overflows that finitude; in short, it interprets that there is a beyond to its being. Thus, to be vigilant to that infinitude is to be in part timeless. And as Annette Aronowicz has said, “to be timeless is thus an infinite capacity to enter history” (Aronowicz xxiv).

The ethical for Levinas designates the acceptance of one’s obligation to the other, to welcome him into justice and openness. The full implication of this welcoming would be the realization of a time, a place, an institution— in sum, a concrete realization, of justice, since to remain abstract would be to remain unrealized. Thus, the inertia one may feel in the face of such a task would be injustice itself. “Messianic politics,” then, would reveal that “the acceptable political order can only come to humanity by way of the Torah, its justice, its judges, and its learned teachers” (“Beyond the State” 94). Furthermore, such politics would require “extreme and historical attention as a vigil” (94). There is, then, a mighty “disproportion that exists between messianic politics and all other politics” (“Promised Land” 65). Messianic politics demand action: “not to build the world is to destroy it,” says Levinas (“Judaism and Revolution” 112). But, what is to be built? Where does the construction of a just world start?

The Temptation of Revolution: The Future of the State

His stress on ethics would seem to place Levinas in the streets, marching for social justice and equality, shouting as hard as he can that the West does injustice to the Other— fight for the Other! Yet that is certainly not the Levinas encountered within his works, especially not within his Talmudic readings. It should be noted that while his philosophical works on the whole do not contain much in the way of political or even cultural criticism, the Talmudic readings actually do. In those readings

we are allowed to see the more informal, often humorous, man that Emmanuel Levinas apparently was. Just why that was so is up for speculation, but it is certain that in his Talmudic readings, Levinas seems to be much more at ease with his criticisms of the times and the people around him. These readings began in the 1960's, often being read either in Paris or, as his comments sometimes indicate, in the shadow of Paris. That time held a lot of interest for the abstract idea of revolution, no matter where or how it was to be brought about. But despite being the one who argued for the restructuring of philosophy to feature ethics rather than ontology, Levinas was never comfortable with the almost unquestioning admiration for revolution that hung in the air surrounding those Talmudic lectures.

He asks at one point, "Will it not be necessary to put some questions to the comrades who are changing the world?" ("Temptation" 32). One of his Talmudic readings, "Judaism and Revolution," takes on these comrades fully, probing and critiquing their methods and their goals. He claims that "revolution must be defined by its content, by values: revolution takes place when one frees man . . . when one tears him away from economic determinism" ("Judaism and Revolution" 101). But to tear him away from his identity as an economic being, while it may free him, determines his identity in yet another, somewhat abstract way. Levinas saw in this radical reconfiguring of the human the identical forms of totalization and power of being that defined Western philosophy since the Greeks. At one point he says, "strange as it may seem, humanity is not defined by its proletariat," emphasizing that Israel carries within itself a universality higher than that of class consciousness (98). Such "transformation of consciousness" as the revolutionaries espouse would venture into every crack and crevice of humanity and recast it into the new, unalienated man. Levinas notes that revolution relies on the overturning of language to meet its goals and instill within others a more

revolutionary spirit. Yet this would be but a recasting of the Other as Same, as Levinas saw. But the uprooting of language accompanied another element to revolution just as detrimental to man.

This particular reading, "Judaism and Revolution," contains the tractate Baba Metsia, 83a-83b, which focuses on the issues of work and feeding. Obligation, the Mishna notes, always goes to custom, and never the employer. The Mishna would seem to support the rise of the proletariat, but its buttressing of custom stops any inspiration for revolution from the Talmud. Levinas asks, "isn't revolution, beyond the violence and break in continuity by which people strive to define it, the refusal of the exegesis of custom?" (101). Such "severing of ties," whether it be that of tradition and custom or that of language, increases violence and insolence. The revolutionary, as Levinas no doubt remembered from the Holocaust, is convinced not only of his power, but also of his justifications to use that power. As he notes, revolution should not be defined by the notion of a spirit of sacrifice, for "there was much spirit of sacrifice in the ranks of those who followed Hitler" (102).

Without custom, without tradition which lends to discourse signification deeper than the mere individual can bring to it, how can one know what is truly good and what is truly evil? Levinas asks, "how can you act politically while ignorant of the nature of Evil, while ignorant of its metaphysical and spiritual reason?" (110). Ideology in any form leads to abstractions, to totalitarianism, to its very own Stalinism ("Beyond the State" 92). The liberation from alienation comes at too great a price, for it comes only through the subjection of the other to the abstraction of ideology. As Levinas says, ideology leads to the death of life by abstraction, and thus to totalitarianism, and eventually its very own forms of Stalinism ("Beyond the State" 92). The State runs the ultimate risk of becoming idolatry, since it "adores being an idol" ("And God Created Woman" 176).

Messianic Discourse and Holy History

Though reference to messianism filters through many of the Talmudic readings, Levinas's more in-depth discussion of what the messiah means to the Talmudic tradition is contained in Difficult Liberty, the chapter "Messianic Texts." There he gathers up four passages from the final chapter of the tractate Sanhedrin which focus on the many aspects of messianism. As Levinas says here, the concept of messianism is actually quite complex: "only popular opinion regards it as simple" (59). To begin, "there is a difference between the future world and the messianic era" (60). According to Rabbi Hiyya b. Abba, the messianic era marks the fulfillment of the prophecies, redeeming and bettering humanity. Also noted is that the messianic era is not simply the end to history; it is more of a removal from history. In addition to what the messianic era is, there is the question as to who the messiah is. He is usually regarded as a person chosen by or representing God, but the texts here do not consider messianism beyond what it signifies for the individual—there is a concurrence that the unity of the Scriptures demand that the messianic era not be the negation of the Law through the anonymity of the individual. The texts reveal the debate as centering on just what the messiah designates according to his name. "Menahem" distinguishes the era as "an age in which the individual accedes to a personal recognition beyond the recognition he receives from belonging to humanity and the State" (87). Then there is the leper scholar, a "form of existence whose individuation is not located in a single being" (87).

Most telling, however, is that the texts consider that messianism may be "a personal vocation among men" (88). This would mean, as Levinas states, "The Messiah is Myself; to be Myself is to be the Messiah" (89). The messiah is also the just man who suffers by taking on the suffering of others. "Who finally takes on suffering of others, if not the being who says 'Me'?" (89). Levinas

concludes that “the fact of not evading the burden imposed by the suffering of others defines ipseity itself. All persons are the Messiah” (89). What this means is that

The Self as Self, taking upon itself the whole suffering of the world, is designated solely by this role. To be thus designated, not to evade to the point of responding before the call resounds— this is precisely what it means to be Me. The Self is one who has promised [to] carry the whole responsibility of the world . . . one who invests himself with responsibility . . . Messianism is no more than this apogee in being, a centralizing, concentration or twisting on itself of the Self. (89)

The texts move on to discuss the messiah as arriving at a point in the political evolution of humanity (93). This evolution finds them along the way towards universality, the confrontation of “multiple beliefs— a multiplicity of coherent discourses,” and seeking among them “one coherent discourse that embraces them all, which is precisely the universal order” (94). Levinas says that this can also describe what can be called “the beginning of philosophy” (94). Levinas says that it is part of the destiny of the West to recognize itself as a “political condition,” whereupon “the free expression of truth and the constitution of the universal State” will come together (94). Essentially, at the very moment when the “political temptations of the light ‘of others’ is overcome, my responsibility is the more irreplaceable” (95). Levinas concludes that here, at this point in the progress of mankind, “real universality” comes forth to “affirm itself”: “It consists in serving the universe. It is called messianism” (95).

Levinas here suggests that messianism can be linked to the philosophical urge for universality, one adopted not out of political exigency but out of the ethical command to serve the other. Acknowledging oneself as messiah by taking on the suffering of all others would be to “deny the universality of [political] confrontation by refusing to grant political life a significance and source of truth” (95). It would be to see human history as absurd, and Holy History as the only rational choice,

founded as it is on the use of reason not for conquest but for questioning and critiquing, particularly those institutions holding forth themselves as arbiters of justice.

Messianism, located within the subject, would be but an “eschatology of truth” (“Contempt for the Torah” 59). The messiah would be that subjectivity reading into its world “the future itself, the coming of a world that never ceases coming,” (59). Though the Talmudic project admits that it is partly the desire to bring together the living tradition of the Judaism with the modern world that Jews find themselves in, it is now revealed that the translations are part of what can be referred to as Levinas’s messianic project, the attempt to bring into one discourse the elements of other discourses as a way of getting man close to obtaining that universal language Levinas speaks of when he discusses his translations of the ethical structures of “Hebrew” into the clarity and ubiquity of “Greek.” His is the attempt to bring into the power of being that the Greeks located within their language long ago the equally ancient lessons of the Talmud, the former initiating universality, the later bringing about “the reconciliation of men” (“Beyond the State” 107). Messianism is the subject, the chosen subject, patiently awaiting this inauguration of a new conscience, one linked with the Holy History of the prophets, by the “encounter” within history of universality, just as the Other inaugurates conscience itself, overflowing the subject with signification. This messianism brings about a new orientation for the subject, which now looks toward the future, anticipating beyond the present a “relation with something that cannot enter into the present, because the present is too small for the Infinite” (“Revelation” 142-43).

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