

The Problem with Levinas

Simon Critchley

EDITED BY

Alexis Dianda

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

OXFORD

UNIVERSITY PRESS

Great Clarendon Street, Oxford, OX2 6DP,
United Kingdom

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
and education by publishing worldwide. Oxford is a registered trade mark of
Oxford University Press in the UK and in certain other countries

© Simon Critchley 2015

The moral rights of the author have been asserted

First Edition published in 2015

Impression: 1

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in
a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the
prior permission in writing of Oxford University Press, or as expressly permitted
by law, by licence or under terms agreed with the appropriate reprographics
rights organization. Enquiries concerning reproduction outside the scope of the
above should be sent to the Rights Department, Oxford University Press, at the
address above

You must not circulate this work in any other form
and you must impose this same condition on any acquirer

Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Data available

Library of Congress Control Number: 2014954690

ISBN 978-0-19-873876-3

Printed and bound by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

Links to third party websites are provided by Oxford in good faith and
for information only. Oxford disclaims any responsibility for the materials
contained in any third party website referenced in this work.

Lecture One

Hegel or Levinas?

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

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

The first thing to note is that this passage summarizes the entire reading strategy of "Violence and Metaphysics," which can be understood as asking a very simple question: *Hegel or Levinas?* Is difference always

¹ Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 152.

referable to a notion of identity, even if this is the identity of identity and non-identity (this is what Derrida means by reconciling “formal tautology and empirical heterology”), or can there be a thought of difference or an experience of difference that falls outside of Hegel’s speculative logic? The argument of “Violence and Metaphysics” is, very crudely, that in criticizing the notion of totality, Levinas thinks he’s stepped beyond Hegel. The notion of totality is identical to the notion of philosophy—it’s an idea Levinas borrows from Franz Rosenzweig. In *The Star of Redemption*, Rosenzweig argues that philosophy, from Ionia to Jena, from Thales to Hegel, is premised on the reduction of multiplicity to totality. Philosophy is based on the sameness of thinking and being that yields the conceivability of the All, of totality.

Levinas thinks he’s stepping beyond Hegel with Rosenzweig, but Derrida shows that every attempt to step beyond Hegel falls back into the orbit of the Hegelian dialectic. That’s the strategy. It’s not that Levinas is wrong, but what he’s trying to do cannot be done *philosophically*. To try and speak philosophically about an experience of otherness is to always collapse the other into the same, and thus for Hegel to have the last word. The attempt to give voice to difference, otherness as such, what’s called “heterology” in “Violence and Metaphysics,” is something that philosophy tries to name but that exceeds philosophy. The word Derrida uses to describe this in “Violence and Metaphysics” is “empiricism,” the pure thought of absolute difference.

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

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

This is Levinas 101. Philosophy as ontology is always a return to the same, always Ulysses returning to Ithaca after ten years of wandering around the Mediterranean getting into all sorts of trouble, eventually

² Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” fn. 92.

returning home to find out whether or not his wife has been faithful. We oppose that to the story of Abraham, who leaves his country forever and goes into the desert, the story of exile and wandering. That's the Levinasian narrative. Then Derrida says,

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

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

Philosophy and Sexual Difference

"Violence and Metaphysics" begins with a strange quotation from Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*. Arnold says that our world moves between two forces: Hellenism and Hebraism. Whoever can understand this movement of forces will understand our culture. However, the culture being referred to here is England. That's right, *England!* That's Arnold's point. The problem with England is that it's too Hebraic. It's a culture of the letter, a culture of the book, a culture of conscience, and of duty. What England does not have is Hellenism; it does not have

³ Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," fn. 92.

“sweetness and light,” the Italian Renaissance, and French pâté. In order for there to be a proper balance in culture, English Hebraism needs to be balanced by Hellenism.

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

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

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

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

⁴ Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” fn. 92.

raises the question of sexual difference as the question of our time, the question we pass over in silence.

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

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

It’s under the question of sexual difference that I want to think about Levinas’ work. This is going to come back to the centre of Lecture Four, though there is a lot more we could say on the topic now. We could, for instance, dispute the reading of *Ulysses* contained in the final footnote to “Violence and Metaphysics.” Joyce’s *Ulysses* is not about νόστος (*nostos*), returning home or homecoming, but what we could in bad Greek call ανόστος (*anostos*), never returning or the absence of home. I think that one of the things that makes Joyce’s *Ulysses* so compelling is that it’s a book about the absence of home rule: the impossibility of home rule both as a central political concept in the context of Irish history in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and also about the impossibility of home rule in relationship to the οἶκος (*oikos*), the dwelling. If you recall, the Jewgreek and greekjew, Leopold Bloom and Stephen Dedalus, finally meet and go back to Bloom’s house at the end of *Ulysses*. They both take a piss in the garden, their streams of piss intersect, and they depart without any reconciliation, Hegelian or otherwise. Upstairs is Molly Bloom, menstruating, sexually fantasizing, engaged in a completely other discourse, what Lacan would call another *jouissance*, a different experience of enjoyment. *Ulysses* is staging the impossibility of home rule. Stephen Dedalus says, “Home also I cannot go.” Stephen Dedalus is someone who has already left home. *Ulysses* is the story of a

⁵ Luce Irigaray, “Sexual Difference,” in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill, ed. Luce Irigaray (London: Continuum, 2005), p. 7.

son, Stephen, who has renounced a father and a father without a son, Rudy, the dead son of Leopold Bloom. It's a story of the absence of home rule told in relationship to this experience of another enjoyment, Molly Bloom's endlessly wonderful exuberance.

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

Why Philosophy? The Problem of Method

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

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

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

We might open a parenthesis at this point—a huge parenthesis that in many ways covers the whole of Levinas' work—and ask the question, why does it *have* to be philosophical? Levinas never answers that question. You can make exactly the same argument and say that the history of

the world is a history of war, totality, and brutality, and that philosophy is bound up with that (in Hegel, for instance), and that's why we need to leave philosophy behind. That's more or less Rosenzweig's strategy. It's also the strategy of another book written in the First World War, Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. Philosophy can only meaningfully reduce itself to propositions of logic that are reducible to tautology or to the empirically verifiable propositions of science. The point of the *Tractatus* is to show that what can be made sense of is just not very interesting. What's actually important is something (ethics, aesthetics, religion) about which nothing philosophical could be said—at least in the early Wittgenstein.

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

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

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

Again, philosophy is identical with transcendental method, with the deduction from the empirical to its a priori structures. Why am

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

Against Aristotle: The Meaning of Drama

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

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

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

They are conjunctures in being for which perhaps the term "drama" would be most suitable, in the sense that Nietzsche would have liked to use it when, at the end of *The Case of Wagner*, he regrets that it has always been wrongly translated by action. But it is because of the resulting equivocation that we forego this term. (TI 28 fn. 2)

Where did Nietzsche come from? Remember that it's 1961 and as Levinas is writing these words, the Eichmann trial is unravelling and

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

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

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

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

Nietzsche was, of course, a philologist, a good one—but he was also a self-consciously bad one at times. He knew when he was making mistakes. Socrates helped Euripides write his plays! He knew that was crazy. Drama is normally understood as action. As Aristotle said in the *Poetics*, tragedy is *μίμησις πράξεως* (*mimesis praxeōs*), the imitation of action. If

⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner*, in *The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (Toronto: Random House, 1997), p. 174.

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

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

Moral Ambiguity

Although it is only now becoming better known, Levinas had serious and persistent literary ambitions. In the 1920s, he wrote a significant number of poems in Russian. During his captivity in Germany for five long years, 1940–5, Levinas expressed the desire to write two novels called *Triste opulence* and *Irréalité et amour*. Fascinatingly, the third volume of Levinas' *Oeuvres complètes* was published in French in 2013 and includes his literary sketches, drafts, and five sets of notes on eros. They are absolutely compelling.⁷ There are two truncated drafts of stories, possibly

⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Eros, littérature et philosophie*, vol. 3 of *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Grasset et Fasquelle, 2013). Of particular note is the preface to this volume by Jean-Luc Nancy, where he explicitly describes Levinas' work as a drama (pp. 13, 27).

the beginnings of a novel, one called *Eros* and the other *La Dame de chez Wepler*. Although the precise dating of these texts is hard to determine, it would appear that Levinas was still working on drafts until 1961, the same time as he was finishing *Totality and Infinity*. Both texts deal with the memory of the collapse of France after the German occupation in 1940, where this ruination of the nation is experienced by the narrator of the stories as an awakening of eros in a situation where suddenly, as Dostoevsky said (and Levinas cites him), “everything is permitted.” The pulling down of the drapery of the state and the sudden exhilaration of both the absence of authority and the presence of barbarism seems to awaken a complex sexual (avowedly heterosexual) desire in Levinas. It is difficult to describe these literary texts as successful, and it is hard for us to read them other than symptomatically, but they show that Levinas’ literary ambition never left him and he conceived of his own activity in intensely dramatic terms.

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

What we have in the 31 extant Greek tragedies—though thankfully most don’t correspond to any simple model of tragedy—is an experience of ambiguity. The most classical examples of this would be the *Oresteia* and the *Antigone*. In the *Antigone*, for example, there is an *ἀγών* (*agôn*), a conflict, around the meaning of the term *νόμος* (*nomos*), the law. Is law something that human beings organize and administer, as Creon will claim, or is law something that the gods decree, as Antigone will claim? The drama is a staging of conflict that—and here I would both agree and argue with Hegel—does not aim towards the victory of either side but is the dramatization of the collision between those two claims. Drama is the enactment, the literal enactment, of ambiguity, of moral ambiguity. And here’s a separate but hugely important claim for me: this is why Plato/Socrates in books 2 and 3, and once again (and why once again?) in book 10, of the *Republic* has to shut drama down, kick Homer and the tragic

poets out of the philosophically well-regulated city. The tragic poets, through the illusory, theatrical depiction of extreme states of rage, grief, and lamentation, introduce an ambiguity into the soul, they lead spectators to be in contradiction with themselves in a way that philosophy has to master. Philosophy is an activity of self-mastery that requires the extensive regulation of affects like grief and laughter.

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

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

Being's interest takes dramatic form in egoisms struggling with one another, each against all, in the multiplicity of allergic egoisms which are at war with one another and are thus together. War is the deed or the *drama* of the essence's interest. (OTB 4; my emphasis)

You could find a thousand examples like this. What Levinas is describing is a kind of Hobbesian theatre of death, which is the drama of the state of nature, the war of all against all. It's like the Jacobean machine plays of Webster, who saw the skull beneath the skin. That is a place where drama pops up in Levinas: the drama of politics. Often drama will appear in Levinas in relation to Plato, and here's another quotation: “From the irony of essence probably come comedy, tragedy and the eschatological consolations which mark the spiritual history of the West” (OTB 176).

Here's another reference to drama in "Enigma and Phenomenon": "Does not the invisibility of God belong to another game, to an approach which does not polarize into a subject-object correlation but is deployed as a drama with several personages?" (EP 67) Is not the relationship to the divine to be understood dramatically? A divine comedy? This is something that comes up repeatedly. Drama can describe the drama of the war of all against all, the drama of the relationship to the divine; it can pop up all over the place. Once you begin looking for the word "drama" in Levinas' work, you find it everywhere.

The Seduction of Facticity

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

The text I want to begin with here is "Is Ontology Fundamental?" It's a very important text. It's the first text where Levinas introduces the idea of the ethical, which is introduced not as the substantive noun "ethics" but as the adjectival "ethical." Levinas' claim in "Is Ontology Fundamental?" is—to make this clearer if you don't know this text well—that any comprehensive relationship to beings or to things is an ontological relationship. Any relationship to any thing that is a relationship of

understanding is ontological. Are *all* relations to things relations of comprehension? If, for example, I say “Coke Zero” and I lay that concept under an intuition of a Coke Zero bottle, then I have grasped it as an ontological relation. Are all of my relationships to things in the world like my relationship to my Coke Zero bottle? The philosopher always chooses medium-sized dry goods as examples. Such is the poverty of philosophy. But there is one thing, one example of a relation that is not reducible to comprehension, and this is what Levinas calls the relation to *Autrui*, the Other, which is described with the adjective ethical. The relationship to the other person is not reducible to comprehension. That is Levinas’ apparently descriptive phenomenological claim. That relation to the Other, irreducible to comprehension, is described with a number of terms in “Is Ontology Fundamental?” He describes it as a relation of prayer, for which we can use the term “religion.” He also says—and this is where the adjective is introduced—he says, “we accept the ethical resonance of that word and all its Kantian echoes” (IOF 8).

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

In 1951, with “Is Ontology Fundamental?,” we begin to get the full articulation of the break with Heidegger and the first announcement of

ethics. But, importantly, ethics is not a substantive term; there's not *an* ethics in Levinas. Ethical is a term used to describe a relation to another, a relation that cannot be reduced to comprehension. That's the thought, and that's really all he says in this paper. Levinasian ethics is adjectival, not substantive.

Let me back up a bit into the essay because we need to work out Levinas' philosophical background more carefully. Why was Heidegger so seductive? Why was Heidegger such a powerful figure for Levinas? For Levinas, the basic advantage of Heidegger's ontology over Husserl's phenomenology is that it begins from an analysis of the situation of the human being in everyday life, what Heidegger, after Wilhelm Dilthey, calls "facticity." Facticity is the key concept that Levinas takes from Heidegger. It should be in flashing lights: *facticity*. To talk transcendental for a moment—and why not, it's Monday afternoon—what is the condition of possibility for the Heideggerian project? The condition of possibility for the Heideggerian project, which is a project into the meaning of Being, is that there is an understanding of Being. We couldn't ask for the meaning of something without an understanding of it. The condition of possibility of the Heideggerian project is what Heidegger calls *Seinsverständnis*, the understanding of Being, which is vague and average but, as Heidegger says, can be phenomenologically clarified. That's the work of *Sein und Zeit*, to clarify phenomenologically that vague and average understanding of Being. Heidegger doesn't get there. He doesn't even get 20 percent of the way there. As he says, *Sein und Zeit* is a fragment. That's the thought.

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

What Levinas fundamentally agrees with is Heidegger's critique of what Levinas calls "intellectualism" or what we might call "theoreticism." Ontology is not an intellectual issue, it's not something I intuit

contemplatively in some sort of Aristotelian βίος θεωρητικός (*bios theōrētikos*); it's a practical, finally embodied, affective process. The fundamental agreement between Levinas and Heidegger can be found in his critique of Husserl in his doctoral thesis from 1930, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, which was the first book published on Husserl in *any* language. If you read the conclusion to the doctoral thesis, what really jumps out is the Heideggerianism of Levinas' critique. Husserl's phenomenology is a right method of doing philosophy, Levinas suggests, but the problem is that it's intellectualist and anti-historical. There is no understanding of facticity and there's no understanding of historicity. Levinas takes that aspect of his thinking from Heidegger and it reappears in all his subsequent works. (Of course, this is a critique of Husserl that any Husserlian worthy of the name could refute in about thirty seconds with reference to *Ideas II* and the *Krisis* manuscripts).

At War with Oneself

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

If at the beginning our reflections are in large measure inspired by the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, where we find the concept of ontology and of the relationship which man sustains with Being, they are also governed by a profound need to leave the *climate* of that philosophy, and by the conviction that we cannot leave it for a philosophy that would be pre-Heideggerian. (EE 19; my emphasis)

What Levinas claims is that his work is dominated by the thought that we have to "leave the *climate*" of Heidegger's philosophy. What does the word "climate" mean? I like to link it, in a sense, to an ethos, which can be thought of as the climate or environment for thinking. Levinas' claim is that there is a profound need to leave the ethical climate of Heidegger's thinking, but we cannot leave it for one that would be pre-Heideggerian. What does that mean? It means that once we accept Heidegger's

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

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

Furthermore, I think there's also something deep here, in the sense in which I think that the correct philosophical attitude is to be at war with yourself. If you're not, you're either not being honest or you're not doing good work. If you know what you think, then it's just going to be boring. You have to begin from the idea that you don't know but you think, and that what you think is probably conflicted at some deep level. Writing is a way of staging that and maybe working it through. Derrida makes a nice remark—I don't cite Derrida enough these days—in his last interview with *Le Monde*. He says, "Je suis en guerre contre moi-même."⁸ When he

⁸ Jacques Derrida, "Je suis en guerre contre moi-même [I'm at war with myself]," interview in *Le Monde*, 19 August 2004.

gave the interview, he knew he was dying of pancreatic cancer and he's at war with the idea that philosophy can provide a consolation in the face of death. This is precisely the road Foucault travelled in those last couple of years. Dying of AIDS, he reads Seneca and we end up with a neo-Stoic discourse: philosophy is a way of life. Derrida would say, "That won't do, it's too easy." For Derrida, there's constant war. For Levinas, the relationship to Heidegger comes out as this crazy polemic: "He's a pagan, he's a Nazi." Yet, it's also self-directed. It has to be otherwise it would have no interest. When you lose your cool, when you start to rage at your mother, or your mother, or your mother, what comes out is not just directed at her. You're usually just spouting off against a mirror. It's you, but you usually don't see yourself. That's what it means to be at war with yourself. It's neurosis, it's fine; it keeps us alive.

Heidegger's Comedy Turns Tragic

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

Levinas' version of phenomenology "seeks to consider life as it is lived" (TIH 155). This is the dream, and this is why he rejects Husserl's phenomenological reduction. He says that the phenomenological reduction is an "act in which we consider life in all of its concreteness but no longer live it" (TIH 155). The Levinasian fantasy, let's say, is a fantasy of philosophy as a consideration of life as we live it. That's what Heidegger seemed to offer to so many other people in that period: Hannah Arendt, Karl Löwith, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Herbert Marcuse, and all the rest of his students. The overall orientation of Levinas' early work might be summarized in the following sentence from the opening pages of his doctoral thesis: "the knowledge of Heidegger's starting point may allow us to understand better Husserl's endpoint" (TIH 155). I'm going to lay that out in more detail when we get to the material in the next lecture

because to get that clear I'm going to have to go a little further into *Being and Time*. The thirty-second version would be that, for Heidegger, the human being's fundamental means of disclosure is *Stimmung* (mood or attunement), which discloses us as *Geworfen* (thrown). The idea of mood disclosing one as thrown is the idea of facticity. Facticity is that disclosure of oneself as stuck to oneself. Being is being riveted to oneself. That's the Heideggerian thought Levinas hears more than anything else.

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

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

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

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

(IOF 3-4; my emphasis)

The fundamental relationship to things is not "Oh gosh, I'm a philosopher, and my thoughts correspond to objects in space." Rather, it's to pick up a cricket bat and beat the baby seal to death with it until the bat breaks and it becomes *vorhanden* rather than *zuhanden*, objectively extant and not just handy. Don't you just love my examples? The fundamental relationship to things is practical handling, not theoretical spectating. *Handeln* or action becomes handling. Dasein is a being with hands, that handles. To comprehend our situation in reality is not to define it epistemologically, but to find ourselves practically in an affective disposition or mood. To comprehend beings is to exist. All this indicates, it would seem, is a rupture with the theoreticist privilege of Western

thought from Aristotle to Kant to Husserl. To think is no longer to contemplate but to commit oneself, to be engulfed by that which one thinks, to be involved, *Bewandtnis*. It's a term that people often pass over in their reading of *Being and Time*: involvement. It's the key concept to understanding what Being-in-the-world is. This is the dramatic event of Being-in-the-world.

We get the drama back with Heidegger. The advantage of contemporary ontology is that it takes us to the dramatic event of Being-in-the-world.

The comedy begins with the simplest of our movements, each of which carries with it an inevitable awkwardness. In putting out my hand to approach a chair, I have creased the sleeve of my jacket. I have scratched the floor, I have dropped the ash from my cigarette. In doing that which I wanted to do, I have done so many things I did not want. The act has not been pure, for I have left some traces. In wiping out these traces, I have left others. Sherlock Holmes will apply his science to this irreducible coarseness of each of my initiatives and thereby, the comedy may well turn tragic. (IOF 4)

Levinas is such a great phenomenologist in the early work. To all those who read Heidegger with Hubert Dreyfus and those crazy California kids, it's like Heidegger is some kind of comedy. "I learned to drive a car really well." "I'm an authentic expert at making omelettes." It's just so fatuous. Those endless, bloody baseball analogies. (Oh god! I've just used one). "It's as if Being-in-the-world is just awesome, man." "Whoa, isn't it great, Being-in-the-world!" "Yeah!" To which I would counter that everyone knows that Being-in-the-world is crap. All things are most definitely not shining. This is how the comedy turns tragic in Levinas' thought. He continues,

When the awkwardness of the act turns against the goal pursued, we're at the height of tragedy. Laius, in order to thwart the deadly predictions, will undertake precisely what is necessary for them to be fulfilled. In succeeding, Oedipus contributes to his own unhappiness like the prey that flees the noise of the hunter across a field covered in snow, thereby leaving the very traces that will be its ruin. (IOF 4)

Isn't that a lovely image? That's the tragedy of Being-in-the-world. We are responsible beyond our intentions. It's impossible for the regard that directs the act to avoid the non-intended actions that come along with it. I've been walking around for the last five weeks with my arm in a

damned sling and I keep knocking things over. I reach out for that thing and inadvertently I knock this thing over because everything is back to front. The paragraph I just quoted is my life. Things turn against us. It's a mess. That's to say our consciousness and our mastery of reality through consciousness does not exhaust our relation to reality, to which we're always present through all the density of our being. "Consciousness of reality does not coincide with our habituation in the world—it is here that Heidegger's philosophy has produced such a strong impression on the literary world" (IOF 4). Any examples come to mind? Anyone? [Student: "Sartre's *The Wall*."] *The Wall*, the short story that takes place during the Spanish Civil War. Pablo Ibbieta is caught and imprisoned, they try to extract information from him and he gives them a false story and off they go. He expects to get killed when they find out the story was false, but then it turns out that the story was true. Pablo laughs so hard that he cries. He's released from detention. That's maybe what Levinas means by "the literary world"—but it's kind of a put-down too, a slight. It's haughtiness. The ambiguity of contemporary ontology is that what looks like comedy becomes tragedy. That's the thought.

Levinas entirely accepts the Heideggerian critique of intellectualism. His thinking moves on the terrain of fundamental ontology. He then tries to move upon that terrain but in a different direction from Heidegger. You know how many times Levinas spoke about Heidegger in public in his lifetime? Twice. Once in 1940, shortly before the Germans invaded France and he was taken prisoner, in the seminar of Jean Wahl, and in 1987 at the time of the Heidegger Affair in Paris, when he was persuaded by Miguel Abensour to give a talk on Heidegger and politics. Of course, being Levinas, he refused to talk directly about the question and instead he focused on a particular passage of *Being and Time* where Heidegger says that to die for another person would simply be to sacrifice myself.⁹ The other's death is secondary to my own death, which is primary. So, the analysis of Being-towards-death in Heidegger is dominated by the idea of my own death. It's non-relational. Levinas says no, it's relational. That's the most significant disagreement with Heidegger, but it is a disagreement that is had on the terrain of Heidegger's philosophy.

⁹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Mcquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 284. See Levinas, "Dying For," in *Entre Nous*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (London: Continuum, 1998), pp. 179–88.

The Theology of Clothes

I want to turn now to “Transcendence and Height.” This paper from 1962 is particularly interesting because it lays out the theses of *Totality and Infinity* in a very economical form with particular reference to epistemological questions, specifically, the relationship between idealism and realism. Picking up the question of drama and the passage we discussed about what appears to be comedy becoming tragedy, I want to jump into the text and see where that goes.

Instead of seizing the Other through comprehension and thereby assuming all the wars that this comprehension presupposes, prolongs, and concludes, the I loses its hold before the absolutely Other, before the human Other (*Autrui*), and, unjustified, can no longer be powerful [the French is “*ne peut plus pouvoir*,” which can also be translated as “no longer able to be able”—SC]. It is not that the I becomes conscious of its nonjustification and the powerlessness of its power such that it, looking down on itself, already settles down in its good conscience, in its nonculpability, to take refuge in itself where there would remain a fragment of the world untouched by original sin. The event of putting into question is the shame of the I for its naïve spontaneity, for its sovereign coincidence with itself in the identification of the Same. This shame is movement in a direction opposed to that of consciousness, which returns triumphantly to itself and rests upon itself. To feel shame is to expel oneself from this rest and not simply to be conscious of this already glorious exile. The just person who knows himself to be just is no longer just [*Le juste qui se connaît juste n'est plus juste*]. The first condition of the first as of the last of the just is that their justice remains clandestine to them. (TH 17)

Levinas is constantly playing on the idea of seizing, which is linked to the idea of grasping, *greifen*, *Griff*. The German verb *greifen* (to grasp) is cognate with *begreifen* (to conceptualize). Therefore, the Concept in Hegel’s sense of *der Begriff* is an act of cognitive grasping or seizure. To conceptualize is to literally lay hold of something. That’s the association Levinas is always making with his idea of ontology: comprehension is the motion of the hand, grabbing and seizing.

I focus on that paragraph because I want you to get a sense of what, in paper after paper, Levinas is continually opposing: the idea of the I or the self that coincides with itself, the ego that coincides with itself, I = I, the subject that posits itself in Fichte, the thinking thing that is certain that it exists in Descartes and is the same as its existence, or whatever formulation one might choose. What Levinas will call “idealism” is the self that

coincides with itself and the world. For Levinas, what Heidegger decisively shows is the implausibility of any idealistic thesis. We're not beings that coincide with ourselves, we're not beings that constitute ourselves, we're beings that are divided against ourselves, and that's the importance of shame.

I will say a word about shame because it's a very important concept in Levinas, but also in general. I'm all about shame. Shame is an inversion of intentionality. It's a movement in a direction opposed to that of consciousness. Consciousness always goes like this: there's me in here with my thoughts and then there's the world over there. The question of epistemology is the question of how we link up mind with world—Good Lord, philosophers even write books called *Mind and World*, it's that easy. Levinas says shame moves in the other direction: shame comes over us. Shame is the reversal of intentionality. To feel shame is to expel oneself from any rest, any complacency—a complacency that Levinas will describe politically and polemically (and we'll see this in Lecture Two) as “bourgeois.” As people say in protest situations, “Shame on you!” Shame is something that is *on* you, coming from outside. Obviously this is the drama of the primal scene, the Garden of Eden where Adam and Eve do whatever they do and then experience themselves as they are seen from outside by Angel Gabriel, or whoever it is that pops up. They are seen and they experience shame. They experience shame in particular at their nudity. So, there they were naked—not nude, it's not as dirty—and they have sinned, and they experience shame. They have become naked and their bodies must become covered. This is the theology of clothing. Clothing is something we use to cover the shame that comes over us, befalls us. It's not that we were nude in paradise because, according to some Catholic theologians, we were wearing the garments of grace, we were clothed. In terms of the theology of clothing, which is a really, really interesting topic, this is why white is the baptismal colour. By wearing white you put back on your garments of grace. You throw off your animal skins and you put on your garments of grace.

Beyond the Tragedy of Finitude

Shame is something we experience from the outside. For Levinas, the point is that the idea of self-coincidence or consciousness as resting in oneself, the “I think, therefore I am,” is sundered or opened up by the

Heideggerian critique. We could run through that whole discussion in Levinas but I won't. There is just one thing I want to mention towards the bottom of the page.

Hence, to be I signifies not being able to escape responsibility. This surplus of being, this existential exaggeration that is called *being me*—this protrusion of ipseity into being is accomplished as a turgescence of responsibility. (TH 17)

Let's go back to our previous line of thought. Throughout this page and the next there's a counter-Sartrean argument about commitment and engagement. I'll briefly mention a difficulty with the translation here—and this is my own fault, after all I did co-translate the text, although I was younger and even more stupid back then. The word "*engagement*," which should simply be translated as "engagement" is translated as both "engagement" and "commitment." If you read page 18 of "Transcendence and Height," the word "*engagement*" appears five times (translated as both "engagement" and "commitment"). It's an important word. If, as in Sartre, we get the idea of free engagement, the engagement of freedom, then in Levinas we get an engagement that is engagement of responsibility prior to freedom. This is, for Levinas, morality and the resurgence of responsibility. He says, "To discover within the Same such a pulsation is to identify the I with morality" (TH 18). The moral subject, the ethical self, for Levinas, is a subject who is not at one with itself, not at rest, not at peace, who does not experience well-being or authenticity. The ethical subject is a being who is engaged to a kind of perpetual dissatisfaction, an odd one though. Further up the page we get the following:

Such an engagement is happy; it is the austere and noncomplacent happiness that lies in the nobility of an election that does not know its own happiness, tempted as it is "by the slumber of the earth" ("and yet Lord, I am not happy . . ."). (TH 18)

It's an unhappy happiness or a happy unhappiness. Election is a strong term for Levinas, and it's also a strong term in Judaism—the idea of chosenness. Levinas flips it: chosenness is not being special or being given exclusive right to something. On the contrary, election is being picked out to carry an excessive burden. Election is something you'd really rather not have. Jewish chosenness is not something you get to choose. It's something that one is—it is *factual*.

This is what I wanted to get to. “Consciousness as a conscious grasp is a possession of the Other by the Same” (TH 18). Consciousness is a conscious grasping, a laying hold of things in the world, the possession of the other by the same, what Levinas calls “alchemy.”

The I dominates the Other and is in a position to withdraw itself through an *epoché* of all engagement in being which it rediscovers as an intentional object, “bracketed” and entirely at its disposal. Total self-knowledge is total immanence and sovereignty. Consequently, the impossibility of a total reflection and of a total disengagement, as affirmed by the philosophy of existence against the idealist subject, leaves that subject in the situation of *Geworfenheit*. (TH 18)

If what Levinas is against is the idea of the reflective constitution of the ego, the “I think, therefore I am,” self-positing or whatever, that he identifies with an idealist notion of the subject that is henceforth rendered impossible, then the subject is left in a situation of thrownness. “This means that no problem is fully determinate at the moment when the subject takes it up and that its freedom is already fatally compromised by commitments which were never contracted” (TH 18). Subjectivity and its freedom are always compromised by fate, by commitments we never contracted. Like, for example, that fate Oedipus discovers he was contracted to before his birth. “The resultant guilt of the subject [*Schuld*, guilt, debt, lack] thus has no ethical significance: it results from the alienation of liberty and not from the unscrupulousness of its very exercise. Such a guilt has tragic and not ethical overtones. It is finitude” (TH 18). Levinas is making two moves here. The first is that any classical notion of the subject is rendered impossible through Heidegger’s critique. We’re not self-constituting, self-reflectively aware, self-positing, or whatever. We find ourselves in this world. Into this world we’re thrown, as Jim Morrison might have said. This means that we’re in a situation of guilt and of lack. Guilt is not seen as feeling bad for having done bad things but as ontological indebtedness. That’s exactly the sense of guilt that Nietzsche talks about in the *Genealogy of Morals*. Guilt originates in debt, which is why being in debt is such a bad thing, as every graduate student at The New School knows. But, Levinas says, this has no ethical significance. It is tragic and it is finitude. To come back to the dramatic terms here, note the identification of tragedy with finitude. The question Levinas’ work poses is the following: *can there be a drama beyond the tragedy of finitude?* The second move he makes in the paper is to

introduce the concept of the infinite. Heidegger was right. He shatters the idealist notion of the subject, but he leaves himself and us with the indebted guilt of our finitude. All Heidegger's Dasein, the being constituted by guilt and debt, can do is to project from that onto the horizon of its Being-towards-death and to momentarily achieve mastery over the everyday.¹⁰ However, that mastery always falls back into facticity.

Heidegger's formulation of what it means to be human is that Dasein exists factually or that Dasein is a thrown project. We can exist, we can become authentic; we can, as it were, rise up into existence and become momentarily ecstatic, but we always fall back. Authenticity is just a modification of inauthenticity. For Levinas, that drama is tragic. That's the Heideggerian tragedy, which is indeed perhaps why Heidegger describes that drama with an interpretation of tragedy. If you know Heidegger's reading of *Antigone* in the *Introduction to Metaphysics*, that's what's going on there. The human being is the uncanniest one who holds himself out into the nothing and shatters himself against death. He can ride the seas and climb the mountains, all of which comes to absolutely nothing. This is the Heideggerian plot of every Werner Herzog movie, from *Aguirre—The Wrath of God*, to *Woyzeck*, to *Fitzcarraldo*, through to *Grizzly Man*, all the way through. The heroic male character pulls himself apart from a deadening influence of the community, the *das Man*, and he rises up and confronts his finitude, becomes Klaus Kinski crazy, and then is shattered against death. That's the Heideggerian story from this Levinasian point of view. It's not at all the whole picture, but it's got some persuasive force.

The problem for Levinas is that having decisively criticized the classical, disengaged notion of the subject (as someone like Charles Taylor would say), how does the self escape the tragedy of finitude? How do we escape the tragedy of the ego's imprisonment in its finitude? What's the problem of Levinas' philosophy? The problem is *how to escape*. It's that simple. The escape route sketched in the work from the mid-1950s and 1960s is through the notion of infinity. We'll look at different escape routes as we proceed, but the issue is that we're stuck to ourselves. We are irredeemably riveted to ourselves and that's tragic. How can that be overcome? In thinking about Levinas' method in terms of drama and

¹⁰ See, for example, paragraph 71 of Heidegger's *Being and Time*.

then looking at the theatrical motifs, hopefully what I've shown now is that the drama of Levinas' work turns on the relationship between comedy and tragedy, from the tragedy of finitude to the comedy of escape.

What's going to happen in the next lecture is that we're going to see this problematic emerge in a really powerful way in Levinas' other early writings. The two texts I'm going to look at are his little essay on what is called "Hitlerism" from 1934 and the longer essay, "On Escape," from 1935. These are both brilliantly insightful texts that will take us to our third question, which addresses the shape of that problem in Levinas' early texts, and then we'll move on and address Levinas' answer to the question.

A Happy Ending

Question: How should we think of this escape?

SC: The escape is going to be an escape from tragedy to comedy. Levinas, you could say, wants to write a comedy. He wants to write a comedy as an idea of life and continuation, that's the thought. To let the cat out of the bag (not that it's much of a cat or indeed much of a bag), this is why the figure of the child is so important for Levinas. Heidegger's critique of the disengaged theory of the subject leaves Dasein stuck to itself in its facticity. So, can there be a way of being me that is not stuck to myself? For Levinas, that's the experience of fecundity that moves through eros. The child is the actualization of fecundity and ultimately a kind of redemption.

Question: Is this close to the figure of the child in Nietzsche's Zarathustra? Is this movement a movement from tears to laughter?

SC: Yes, in a sense. It's a movement from the tragedy of finitude to the comedy of infinitude. But in order to make good on this idea of being stuck to oneself, we need to read Levinas' essay on Hitlerism because the latter elicits a political and metaphysical structure that celebrates our being attached to ourselves, celebrates our being riveted to ourselves. Any politics that affirms such attachment is *barbaric*, Levinas insists, and the alternative is liberalism. The problem is that liberalism is a failure. For Levinas, liberalism is the political corollary of idealism. Liberalism takes idealism's idea of the subject and makes it a political subject of

rights. I am a subject in the world with rights and I can choose this or that. Liberalism was decisively defeated with the advent of Hitlerism.

The radical question that Levinas doesn't pose in the 1930s but that is implicit in his work is, given the failure of liberalism's comedy, can there be an anti-fascist drama? That is, of course, also Bataille's question. That's what Bataille keeps trying to figure out in his different fantasies, in his different groups. Throughout his life, particularly in the 1930s and 1940s, Bataille experimented with different forms of informal anti-fascist, anti-liberal institutions, from *Contre-Attaque*, the *Collège de Sociologie*, and the *Collège Socratique* through to the more mysterious *Acéphale*. Now, I am not preaching human sacrifice in a forest anytime soon (at least, I am not going to admit that in public), but I find Bataille an interesting example to think about in terms of experimenting with institutional forms that respond to Levinas' basic dramatic problem.

Listen to this quotation from the end of the introduction to *Otherwise than Being*:

[I]f philosophizing consists in assuring oneself of an absolute origin, the philosopher will have to efface the trace of his own footsteps and unendingly efface the traces of the effacing of the traces, in an interminable methodological movement staying where it is. (OTB 20)

If philosophy is the idea of an absolute origin—the self-certainty of the *res cogitans* in Descartes, the self-positing of the subject in Fichte, the transcendental ego in Husserl—it is condemned to an endless act of reinvention, wiping the slate clean and beginning again . . . and again . . . which is what Husserl kind of ended up doing: yet another bloody introduction to phenomenology. One reads him and thinks, here we go again. But listen to this. We could spend days on these lines, but I know it is really time to finish:

Unless, that is, the naivety of the philosopher does not call, beyond the reflection on oneself, for the critique exercised by *another* philosopher, whatever be the imprudences that that one will have committed in his turn, and the gratuity of his own saying. Philosophy thus arouses a drama between philosophers and an intersubjective movement which does not resemble the dialogue of teamworkers in science, nor even the Platonic dialogue which is the reminiscence of a drama rather than the drama itself. It is sketched out in a different structure; empirically it is realized as the history of philosophy in which new interlocutors always enter

who have to restate, but in which the former ones take up the floor to answer in the interpretations they arouse, and in which, nonetheless, despite this lack of “certainty in one’s movements” or because of it, no one is allowed a relaxation of attention or a lack of strictness. (OTB 20)

What Levinas is imagining is an idea of philosophy as a drama between philosophers that is neither a dialogue of people working in a team nor a Platonic dialogue, which is a reminiscence of another drama, namely, Attic drama, tragic drama. I find this idea of philosophy as a drama between philosophers fascinating and potentially transformative. I’ve been trying to understand Levinas’ work as a kind of drama in those terms, in particular a drama with Heidegger. Will we get a happy ending? We will see.