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TOTALITY AND INFINITY

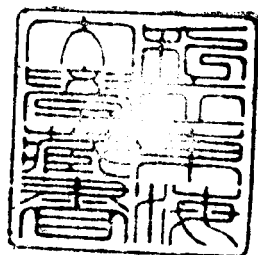
AN ESSAY ON EXTERIORITY

by

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W083285



1979

MARTINUS NIJHOFF PUBLISHERS
THE HAGUE/ BOSTON/ LONDON

083285

Originally published in French: Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et infini: essai sur l'extériorité*, Martinus Nijhoff, La Haye, 1961, 4e ed. 1971, xviii + 284 pp., ISBN 90-247-5105-5
PHAENOMENOLOGICAL 8.

First printing 1969, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers and Duquesne University Press.
Second printing 1979, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers and Duquesne University Press.

The distribution of this book is handled by the following team of publishers:

for the United States and Canada

Kluwer Boston, Inc.
160 Old Derby Street
Hingham, MA 02043

for all other countries

Kluwer Academic Publishers Group
Distribution Center
P.O. Box 322
3300 AH Dordrecht
The Netherlands

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ISBN 90-247-2288-8

PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.

C. THE ETHICAL RELATION AND TIME

1. *Subjectivity and Pluralism*

Separation, effected in the concrete as habitation and economy, makes possible the relation with the detached, absolute exteriority. This relation, metaphysics, is brought about primordially by the epiphany of the Other in the face. Separation opens up between terms that are absolute and yet in relation, that absolve themselves from the relation they maintain, that do not abdicate in it in favor of a totality this relation would sketch out. Thus the metaphysical relation realizes a multiple existing [un exister multiple]—a pluralism. But this relation would not realize pluralism if the formal structure of relationship exhausted the essence of relationship. We must explicate the power that beings placed in relation have of absolving themselves from the relation. This power entails a different sense of absolution for each of the separated terms; the Metaphysician is not absolute in the same sense as the Metaphysical. The dimension of height from which the Metaphysical comes to the Metaphysician indicates a sort of non-homogeneity of space, such that a radical multiplicity, distinct from numerical multiplicity, can here be produced. Numerical multiplicity remains defenseless against totalization. For a multiplicity to be able to be produced in the order of being, *disclosure* (where being does not only manifest itself, but effectuates itself, or exerts itself, or holds sway, or reigns) is not enough; it is not enough that its *production* radiate in the cold splendor of truth. In this splendor the diverse is united—under the panoramic look it calls for. Contemplation is itself absorbed into this totality, and precisely in this way founds that objective and eternal being or that “impassive nature resplendent in its eternal beauty” (according to Pushkin’s expression), in which common sense recognizes the prototype of being, and which, for the philosopher, confers its prestige on totality. The subjectivity of knowl-

edge cannot break with this totality, which is reflected in the subject or reflects the subject. The objective totality *remains exclusionary* of every *other*, despite its being laid bare, that is, despite its apparition to an other. Contemplation is to be defined, perhaps, as a process by which being is revealed without ceasing to be one. The philosophy it commands is a suppression of pluralism.

For a multiplicity to be maintained, there must be produced in it the subjectivity that could not seek congruence with the being in which it is produced. Being must hold sway as revealing itself, that is, in its very being flowing toward an I that approaches it, but flowing toward it infinitely without running dry, burning without being consumed. But this approach can not be conceived as a cognition in which the knowing subject is reflected and absorbed. That would be to forthwith destroy this exteriority of being by a total reflection—which cognition aims at. The impossibility of total reflection must not be posited negatively—as the finitude of a knowing subject who, being mortal and already engaged in the world, does not reach truth—but rather as the *surplus* of the social relation, where the subjectivity remains in face of . . . , in the straightforwardness of this welcome, and is not measured by truth. The social relation itself is not just another relation, one among so many others that can be produced in being, but is its ultimate event. The very utterance by which I state it and whose claim to truth, postulating a total reflection, refutes the unsurpassable character of the face to face relation, nonetheless confirms it by the very fact of stating this truth—of telling it to the Other. Multiplicity therefore implies an objectivity posited in the impossibility of total reflection, in the impossibility of conjoining the I and the non-I in a whole. This impossibility is not negative—which would be to still posit it by reference to the idea of truth contemplated. It results from the surplus of the epiphany of the other, who dominates me from his height.

This foundation of pluralism does not congeal in isolation the terms that constitute the plurality. While maintaining them against the totality that would absorb them, it leaves them in commerce or in war. At no moment are they posited as causes of themselves—which would be to remove from them all receptivity and all activity, shut them up each in its own interiority, and isolate them like the Epicurean gods living in the interstices of being, or like the gods immobilized in the between-time¹ of

¹ Cf. our article "La réalité et son ombre," *Les Temps modernes*, Nov., 1948.

art, left for all eternity on the edge of the interval, at the threshold of a future that is never produced, statues looking at one another with empty eyes, idols which, contrary to Gyges, are exposed and do not see. Our analyses of separation have opened another perspective. The primordial form of this multiplicity is not, however, produced as war, nor as commerce. War and commerce presuppose the face and the transcendence of the being appearing in the face. War can not be derived from the empirical fact of the multiplicity of beings that limit one another, under the pretext that where the presence of the one inevitably limits the other, violence is identical with this limitation. Limitation is not of itself violence. Limitation is conceivable only within a totality where the parts mutually define one another. Definition, far from doing violence to the identity of the terms united into a totality, ensures this identity. The limit separates and unites in a whole. The reality fragmented into concepts that mutually limit one another forms a totality by virtue of that very fragmentation. As a play of antagonistic forces the world forms a whole, and is deducible or should be deducible, in a completed scientific thought, from one unique formula. What one is tempted to call antagonism of forces or of concepts presupposes a subjective perspective, and a pluralism of wills. The point at which this perspective converges does not form a part of the totality. Violence in nature thus refers to an existence precisely not limited by an other, an existence that maintains itself outside of the totality. But the exclusion of violence by beings susceptible of being integrated into a totality is not equivalent to peace. Totality absorbs the multiplicity of beings, which peace implies. Only beings capable of war can rise to peace. War like peace presupposes beings structured otherwise than as parts of a totality.

War therefore is to be distinguished from the logical opposition of the *one* and the *other* by which both are defined within a totality open to a panoramic view, to which they would owe their very opposition. In war beings refuse to belong to a totality, refuse community, refuse law; no frontier stops one being by another, nor defines them. They affirm themselves as transcending the totality, each identifying itself not by its place in the whole, but by its *self*.

War presupposes the transcendence of the antagonist; it is waged against man. It is surrounded with honors and pays the last honors; it aims at a presence that comes always from elsewhere, a being that appears in a face. It is neither the hunt nor struggle with an element. The possibility, retained by the adversary, of thwarting the

best laid calculations expresses the separation, the breach of totality, across which the adversaries approach one another. The warrior runs a risk; no logistics guarantees victory. The calculations that make possible the determination of the outcome of a play of forces within a totality do not decide war. It lies at the limit of a supreme confidence in oneself and a supreme risk. It is a relation between beings exterior to totality, which hence are not in touch with one another.

But would the violence that is impossible among beings ready to constitute a totality—that is, to reconstitute it—then be possible among separated beings? How could separated beings maintain any relation, even violence? It is that the refusal of totality in war does not refuse relationship—since in war the adversaries seek out one another.

Relationship between separated being would indeed be absurd were the terms posited as substances, each *causa sui*, since, as pure activities, capable of receiving no action, the terms could undergo no violence. But the relation of violence does not remain at the level of the wholly formal conjuncture of relationship. It implies a specific structure of the terms in relation. Violence bears upon only a being both graspable and escaping every hold. Without this living contradiction in the being that undergoes violence the deployment of violent force would reduce itself to a labor.

Thus for relationship between separated beings to be possible, the multiple terms would have to be partially independent and partially in relation. The notion of finite freedom then imposes itself to reflection. But how is such a notion to be formed? To say that a being is partially free immediately raises the problem of the relation existing in it between the free part, *causa sui*, and the non-free part. To say that the free part is impeded in the non-free part would bring us back indefinitely to the same difficulty: how can the free part, *causa sui*, undergo anything whatever from the non-free part? The finitude of freedom must therefore not signify some limit within the substance of the free being, divided into one part endowed with a causality of its own and one part subject to exterior causes. The notion of independence must be grasped elsewhere than in causality. Independence would not be equivalent to the idea of *causa sui*, which, moreover, is belied by birth, non-chosen and impossible to choose (the great drama of contemporary thought), which situates the will in an anarchic world, that is, a world without origin.

Thus freedom, an abstraction that reveals itself to be self-contradic-

tory when one supposes it to have a limitation, can not describe beings in the relation that does not constitute totality, beings in war.

A being independent of and yet at the same time exposed to the other is a temporal being: to the inevitable violence of death it opposes its time, which is postponement itself. It is not finite freedom that makes the notion of time intelligible; it is time that gives a meaning to the notion of **finite freedom**. Time is precisely the fact that the whole existence of the mortal being—exposed to violence—is not being for death, but the “not yet” which is a way of being against death, a retreat before death in the very midst of its inexorable approach. In war death is brought to what is moving back, to what *for the moment* exists completely. Thus in war the reality of the time that separates a being from its death, the reality of a being taking up a position with regard to death, that is, the reality of a conscious being and its interiority, is recognized. As *causa sui* or freedom beings would be immortal, and could not, in a kind of dumb and absurd hatred,* grapple on to one another. Were beings only given over to violence, only mortal, they would be dead in a world where nothing opposes anything, a world whose time would break up into eternity. The notion of a mortal but temporal being, apprehended in the will (a notion we shall develop) differs fundamentally from every causality leading to the idea of the *causa sui*. Such a being is exposed, but also opposed to violence. Violence does not befall it as an accident that befalls a sovereign freedom. The hold that violence has over this being—the mortality of this being—is the primordial fact. Freedom itself is but its adjournment by time. What is at issue is not finite freedom in which a singular compound of activity and passivity would be produced, but rather a freedom originally null, offered in death to the other, but in which time arises as a *détente*: the free will is necessity relaxed and postponed rather than finite freedom. It is *détente* or distension—postponement by virtue of which nothing is definitive yet, nothing consummated, skill which finds for itself a dimension of retreat there where the inexorable is imminent.

The contact of the soul with the body it has at its disposal is inverted into the non-contact of a blow struck in the void. The adversary's skill, which cannot be summed up in forces, has to be taken into account—but how take it into account? My skill postpones the inevitable. To hit, the blow must be struck there where the adversary has absented himself; to be parried, I have to pull back from the point at which he

* “. . . haine sourde et absurde . . . ”

touches me. Ruse and ambush—Ulysses' craft—constitute the essence of war. This skill is inscribed in the very existence of the body; it is suppleness—a simultaneity of absence and presence. Corporeity is the mode of existence of a being whose presence is postponed at the very moment of his presence. Such a distension in the tension of the instant can only come from an infinite dimension which separates me from the other, both present and still to come, a dimension opened by the face of the Other. War can be produced only when a being postponing its death is exposed to violence. It can be produced only where discourse was possible: discourse subtends war itself. Moreover violence does not aim simply at disposing of the other as one disposes of a thing, but, already at the limit of murder, it proceeds from unlimited negation. It can aim at only a presence itself infinite despite its insertion in the field of my powers. Violence can aim only at a face.

It is therefore not freedom that accounts for the transcendence of the Other, but the transcendence of the Other that accounts for freedom—a transcendence of the Other with regard to me which, being infinite, does not have the same signification as my transcendence with regard to him. The risk that war involves measures the distance that separates bodies within their hand-to-hand struggle. The Other, in the hands of forces that break him, exposed to powers, remains unforeseeable, that is, transcendent. This transcendence is not to be described negatively, but is manifested positively in the moral resistance of the face to the violence of murder. The force of the Other is already and henceforth moral. Freedom, be it that of war, can be manifested only outside totality, but this "outside totality" opens with the transcendence of the face. To think of freedom as *within* totality is to reduce freedom to the status of an indetermination in being, and forthwith to integrate it into a totality by closing the totality over the "holes" of indetermination—and seeking with psychology the laws of a free being!

But the relation that subtends war, an asymmetrical relation with the other who, as infinity, opens time, transcends and dominates the subjectivity (the I not being transcendent with regard to the other in the same sense that the other is transcendent with regard to me), can take on the aspect of a symmetrical relation. The face, whose ethical epiphany consists in soliciting a response (which the violence of war and its murderous negation alone can seek to reduce to silence), is not satisfied with a "good intention" and a benevolence wholly Platonic. The "good intention" and the "benevolence wholly Platonic" are only the residue of

an attitude assumed where one enjoys things, where one can divest oneself of them and offer them. Henceforth the independence of the I and its position before the absolutely other can figure in a history and a politics. Separation is embedded in an order in which the asymmetry of the interpersonal relation is effaced, where I and the other become interchangeable in commerce, and where the particular man, an individuation of the genus man, appearing in history, is substituted for the I and for the other.

Separation is not effaced in this ambiguity. We must now show in what concrete form the freedom of separation is lost, and in what sense it is maintained even in its very loss, and can resurrect.

2. Commerce, the Historical Relation, and the Face

The will at work ensures the separated being's *being at home with itself*. But in its work, which has a signification but remains mute, the will remains unexpressed. Labor, in which it is exerted, is visibly inserted in the things, but the will forthwith absents itself from them, since works take on the anonymity of merchandise, an anonymity into which, as a wage-earner, the worker himself may disappear.

The separated being can, to be sure, shut itself up in its interiority. Things can not counter it absolutely, and Epicurean wisdom lives from this truth. But the will, whereby a being wields itself by somehow holding in its own hands all the strings that operate its being, is by its work exposed to the Other. Its exertion is seen as a thing, if only by virtue of the insertion of its body in the world of things. Corporeity thus describes the ontological regime of a primary self-alienation, contemporaneous with the very event by which the self ensures, against the unknown factor of the elements, its own independence, that is, its self-possession or its security. The will equivalent to atheism—which refuses the Other as an influence being exerted on an I or holding it in its invisible meshes, which refuses the Other as a God inhabiting the I—the will which tears itself from this possession, from this enthusiasm, as the very power of rupture, delivers itself over to the Other in its work, the very work which permits it to ensure its interiority. Interiority thus does not exhaust the existence of the separated being.

The idea of *fatum* accounted for the reversal every heroism in a role suffers. The hero finds himself playing a role in a drama exceeding his heroic intentions, which, by their very opposition to that drama, hasten