

Review Article

Losing Face

Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority.

By Emmanuel Lévinas (Translated by A. Lingis). (1969). Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press. ISBN 0-8207-0245-5; pp. 314

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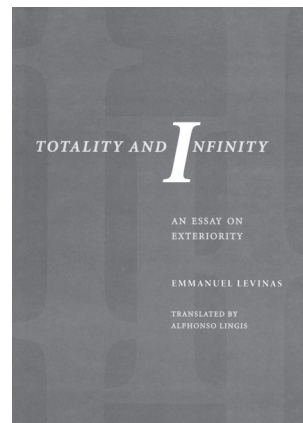
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The welcoming of the face and the work of justice — which conditions the birth of truth itself — are not interpretable in terms of disclosure. The relation between the same and the other is not always reducible to knowledge of the other by the same, nor even to the *revelations* of the other to the same, which is already fundamentally different from disclosure. (Lévinas, 1961/1969, p. 28)

“Already of *itself* ethics is an optics”. (Lévinas, 1961/1969, p. 29)

The word by way of preface which seeks to break through the screen stretched between the author and the reader by the book itself does not give itself out as a word of honour. But it belongs to the very essence of language, which consists in continually undoing its phrase by the fore-word or the exegesis, in unsaying the said, in attempting to restate without ceremonies what has already been ill understood in the inevitable ceremonial in which the said delights. (Lévinas, 1961/1969, p. 30)

Totality and Infinity was first published in 1961, by the distinguished publisher of philosophical works engaging phenomenology, Martinus Nijhoff. It was translated into English in 1969 by one of the major translators of works on phenomenology, Alphonso Lingis, an extraordinary thinker in his own right. If it was not, perhaps, for a disquieting essay by Jacques Derrida, first published in French in 1964, titled “Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Lévinas,” and appearing, translated, in *Writing & Difference* in 1978, Lévinas may well have been engaged with more slowly than he has. Lévinas’s philosophical background included working under the founder of



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German phenomenology, Edmund Husserl, and working closely with Martin Heidegger, up until 1933 when Heidegger joined the National Socialists in Germany. In 1930, Lévinas had published, in French, the most thorough work at that time devoted to the phenomenology of Husserl. This was re-issued in 1963, at a time co-incident with Derrida's important work on Husserl. *Totality and Infinity* was Lévinas's first major philosophical writing that, in a significant way, draws away from both Husserl and Heidegger in as much as it aims to ground ethics as first philosophy. In this review, I aim simply to give some perspective on the book's curious title, and its most startling deviations from phenomenology in what, perhaps, are most well publicised concerning Lévinas: his ethics of the face-to-face, and the enigma of the stranger.

Totality, Infinity, and Exteriority

The book's full title is *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. The notion of exteriority preoccupied both Lévinas and his close friend, the writer Maurice Blanchot, during the 1930s and 1940s, as they separately and collaboratively grappled with phenomenology's questioning of "Being", how human beings may disclose the question of Being and how Being, as such, remains elusively outside any attempts we have at its disclosing. Being is "The Outside", an exteriority that forever withdraws as we approach its meaning. If we speak of an interiority, that in some way is the other to such exteriority, it is neither in a binary relation to it, nor is it one of reciprocal exchange. Our interiority, which is to say our identity, our being-at-home-with-ourselves, my "I," can only remain, radically, outside this "Outside," withdrawn from this absolute withdrawal. During the 1930s in particular, French philosophical thinking was in a thoroughgoing way under the sway of the work of Georg Hegel, due principally to the disseminating of Hegel's (1807/1977) *Phenomenology of Spirit* in a lecture series run over a number of years by the Russian émigré French philosopher, Alexandre Kojève. At the core to Hegel's understanding of identity is the reciprocity of the other in establishing the locus of identity. Such reciprocity works dialectically, through the negating of the negation of identity as difference, that is, identity is difference differing from itself. The radicality of the work of Lévinas (and Blanchot), due in part to phenomenology's difficulty with dialectical processes, is a thinking of the other, and the other of the other (as the same) outside of all dialectics.

We have the twin terms: totality and infinity. How do they tally up, and how do they engage these peculiar notions of exteriority and identity? What is totality for Lévinas, and what is infinity? Coming from a tradition of phenomenology, Lévinas wants to ask how can we come to understand what existence is as something that is lived? What is living experience? Phenomenology aims to start not with defining a philosophical system and then apply it to the human, but rather start with an existent and her existence. That existent's existence is primordially (in the sense of first created or developed) an enjoyment of and nourishment from things. To be sure, those things are "alien" in the sense that they are other to me but crucially, for Lévinas, they are not negations of me. Negation is a logical relation of otherness and, initially and for the most part, my existence is not primordially a logical one. It is egocentric, a world of "mineness" whose horizon is disclosed by my reach into things by which they become the same: who are my friends, the food I eat, where I can reside; in short: the sum total of that which construes

the interiority of my world of relations. There is a finitude to my world. It is a totality by which otherness is, at once, also the same.

The Other

At the beginning of *Totality and Infinity*, in Section I, titled “The Same and the Other,” Lévinas has a sub-heading: “The Breach of Totality.” He commences this sub-section with a difficult though important sentence: “This absolute exteriority of the metaphysical term, the irreducibility of movement to an inward play, to a simple presence of self to self, is, if not demonstrated, claimed by the word transcendent” (p. 35). What is he saying? Lévinas reserves the term, “transcendence,” for a special category of phenomena that Lévinas qualifies by the notion of infinity. A further sub-heading suggests “Transcendence is not negativity,” so transcendence is not a dialectical breach of totality by determining its difference, for example, “infinity,” and finding a synthetic moment in the differing of that difference. The relation of infinity to totality is one of transcendence, but a movement that is radically asymmetrical with respect to the same, identity, interiority. Lévinas reserves the designation of the “other” (with a small “o”) for my relation to things construing the interior totality of my existence, he also designates a non-reciprocal absolute otherness as “Other” with a capitalised “O”. But what is this Other? What is the “breach of totality” concerned with? The entire book, *Totality and Infinity*, is structured precisely around this discussion. Section I introduces the grand theme of the Same and the Other; and Section II is devoted to interiority and economy, to our everyday world of phenomena, commerce, enjoyment, dwelling in general, that all come under the ontological disclosure of totality, the self-same, an egoistic I whose encounter is essentially with others reducible to the same. Section III constitutes the radicality of Lévinas’s thinking: “Exteriority and the Face.” For the most part, I devote the remainder of this review to discussing aspects of Section III. The book concludes, even more radically, with Section IV: “Beyond the Face”. It is radical in the sense that Lévinas thematically explores how an ethics prior to Being opens a radical inequality in identity: “The Other qua Other is situated in a dimension of height and abasement — glorious abasement; he has the face of the poor, the stranger, the widow, and the orphan, and, at the same time, of the master called to invest and justify my freedom” (Lévinas, 1961/1969, p. 251). It is important to note a difficulty in Lévinas’s designations of “Other” and “other,” and the recourse by his translator to resolve this. Lévinas uses two expressions that can be translated into “other,” one being the French *autrui*, and the other *autre*. To complicate things, Lévinas sometimes capitalises either of these terms and sometimes they appear with a small “a”. Moreover, he is notoriously inconsistent. Lingis, his translator, noted: “With the author’s permission, we are translating “*autrui*” (the personal Other, the you) by “Other,” and “*autre*” by “other.” In doing so, we regrettably sacrifice the possibility of reproducing the author’s use of capital or small letters with both of these terms in the French text” (Lévinas, 1961/1969, pp. 24-25n).

Ethics Before Being: The Face of the Other

If totality is a way for Lévinas to discuss a notion of the self whose existence is one of self-certainty, of belonging in a circuit of reciprocity with others construing egoism, what does infinity serve, as a principle of transcendence? In part, we need to see a number of

problem-fields that Lévinas was working in and working against. A crucial one was Heidegger, and the thoroughgoing betrayal Lévinas felt when Heidegger became a Nazi. At the time Lévinas was working on a publication on Heidegger, which he immediately abandoned. He recognised something looming in Heidegger's fundamental ontology, as a questioning of the meaning of Being that was insufficient. That insufficiency had everything to do with something limiting Heidegger's question and its ethical implications. Lévinas developed a more radical questioning of ontology, the question of an existent's existence that *began* with the question of ethics, rather than, as for Heidegger, presupposed primordially the question of ethics. But ethics was already a cornerstone of German idealist philosophy. It was not as if ethics, from Aristotle to Hegel, had not been key to philosophy. The radicality of Heidegger, in part, was that, for fundamental ontology, ethics could not simply be a branch of philosophy, along with metaphysics, logic and so on. The question of an existent's existence is so primordial that such "branches" of philosophy are meaningless. Lévinas did not want to lose this essential aspect to phenomenology. His recourse, radical in the extreme, is to propose that there is "something" prior to ontology, prior to all Being and the question of Being, that must be disclosive of an existent's existence, even prior to that existent's knowing herself as self. There must be something that is a primordial experience of life that opens the question of Being as such. That for Lévinas, that experience, names ethics. Ethics comes before Being. But suddenly we have lost ourselves. There must be some encounter that is absolute and infinite that opens the disclosive horizon of the question of Being, which is to say, the question of "what is" such that a totalising and egoistic relation of otherness is opened. That absolute and infinite encounter is with what Lévinas calls the Other. He provides a curious name for it, this encounter. He calls it the face-to-face.

Now we have to do some careful reckoning, otherwise we end up with Lévinas sounding like a quaint mystical poet or obeying a strict return to Plato. We'll start with the Platonic caution. It is Plato who inaugurates metaphysics in the sense that his writings, the teachings of Socrates, suggest there are two worlds, a true one and an apparent one. The true one, the one of philosophical ideas, is meta-physical, while the apparent one, the one of things here before us, is a copy or, indeed, copy of a copy. Platonism is still with us every time we turn to the user's manual in order to fix our broken world of things. In some interesting ways, phenomenology is anti-Platonist. It begins with an existent's world of (broken) things and tries to remain there. Hence, when we have Lévinas inscribe the primordial infinity of the face-to-face and the totalising of the self-same, it is easy to read the former as an authentic ethical existence of a strange "metaphysical" face of the Other that becomes the model for our inferior world of faces that we eyeball every day. Equally, we can read the infinity of the Other, whose absoluteness Lévinas also terms the "most high" and at times locates as our relation to God, as a mysticism of existence gone rife, when our ethical problems are more grounded in humans doing barbaric things to one another. Hence our need to reckon what is and is not this "face." It is complex, as Lévinas will, at times, deny neither a version of the Platonic reading, nor mysticism. But one thing to be clear on: Lévinas wants to emphasise the simple experiences of being alive. The face-to-face is an encounter of one existent and another. Lévinas reserves that encounter in an anthropocentric circle (the face of the Other is curiously human) and

was criticised, even in the 1940s, by Blanchot for this limit, which Blanchot saw as a weak return to Hegelianism or at least the installing of a totalising self-same at the heart of absolutist infinity. For Blanchot, the face-to-face of absolute ethical encounter is with any thing. It constitutes the most thoroughgoing opening to a question of ontology as such.

Ethics, Time and Language

Now the hard part of our reckoning: if for Lévinas the face-to-face of an absolute Other is a primordial exteriority, an ethics that opens ontology itself, and thus our totalising self-to-self relations of interiority, does it happen one day once and for all, such that ontology's motor of totalising is started? Is it a radical origin to each existent's self-conscious existence? No. It is not an "origin" in this sense at all. We need to introduce two more key aspects to Lévinas's pre-ontological thinking of ethics before we are done here with this summary review. These are the last two "steps" in the discussion that probably open more questions than answers. One concerns time and the other concerns language. It is not by chance that time and language were the two most exhausting themes in the writings of Heidegger, and that time and language preoccupied Husserl's phenomenology, to which Lévinas becomes closer. Phenomenology aimed at disclosing the nature of lived time, rather than how one lives according to the logic of time's progression, as with clock time. To be sure, we live by clocktime, but primordially and existentially it is not how we exist. Similarly, phenomenology asks how does language open to human being, not in terms of language as instrumental wanting-to-say, but more primordially, as an existent's existing with things and others. Both time and language fold into Lévinas's manner of articulating some fundamental existential and non-dialectical differences between the absolute transcendence and exteriority of the face-to-face with the Other and the totalising commerce of a self's dwelling and enjoyment.

There are two aspects to temporality: diachrony and synchrony; and two understandings of communicability: the saying and the said. The time of our totalising selves Lévinas names "synchrony." It is the time of narrative and sequential unfolding. It is "synchronous" because from one other to an-other, this time can be a temporalising of the self-same. We are in the same temporality. However, in the primordial ethical encounter of a human face, this time is broken, fractured, and yet re-tied to maintain the continuities of the synchronous. Yet it is the ethical that happens in encountering another human such that an each-time break and rejoining of time's sequencing happens. This other temporality, the diachronic is a time of infinite past and infinite futurity, as the ecstatic though pre-ontological disclosure of temporalising. Diachrony is an originary though un-recoupable temporalising of an absolute transcendence of the Other. It opens time but in a peculiar sense. This doubling of a temporalising, that is not binary in nature nor under the sway of a dialectics of negation, has its correlate in language's fundamental ontology. The "said" is what we, in our everyday commerce and enjoyment come to understand in language's communicability, so much content deliverable in the temporalising of time's self-same synchronies. Yet, the face-to-face happens essentially and ethically as the open possibility of language as such. It is an opening invocation to a radical Otherness, infinitely strange and unknowable, by a "self" that "is" prior to all ontological encounter or commitment. In this sense, the encounter opens a self to herself. The ethical encounter, in its diachrony, in its "birth" of a temporalising of ontology's possibility is a "saying" that is the immediacy of an asymmetrical

ethics of infinite obligation to the Other. This obligation, pronounceable in communicability's saying, is un-recoupable in the said. Lévinas calls this as well, prayer, opening to the strangeness and infinite obligation to God.

The Enigma of the Stranger

Lévinas's ethics, then, can be neatly summarised as welcoming the stranger. By this he means, truly, the stranger: what is unfathomable and unknowable, as a primordial ethics that opens the question of the being of this stranger. There is no reciprocity. I am obliged, infinitely so, to invite this radical exteriority into my dwelling, to my interiority, my self. As host to this face, I become hostage in my own dwelling. I am turned out and evicted. My totality is sundered by an infinite obligation to an Other preceding all others. It is in this sense that Lévinas's ethics is exceedingly radical and why he discriminates between what he terms ethics and what he terms justice. Justice operates or happens in the interiority of my dwelling but as the mediating with others. It accommodates the commerce of life and the self-same. But radically, such ontology of self, justice, other and the same will always already be threatened with eviction by the face of the Other. In this sense, justice can never be settled. Its aim at totalising settlement is forever disrupted in the diachrony and saying of any face-to-face.

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