ON ESCAPING THE SEEMINGLY INESCAPABLE: REFLECTIONS ON BEING IN LEVINAS

BENDA HOFMEYR, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

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Like his one-time teacher, Heidegger, Levinas makes a distinction between Being (*Sein*) and beings (*Seiendes*), but prefers to speak of 'existence' and the 'existent'. Again, like Heidegger, Levinas understands existence in its verbal sense as the self-unfolding *act* of Being that is attested to in the manifestation of particular beings. Unlike his teacher, however, existence signals for him the unbearable heaviness of Being, as if being a Jew as opposed to being a German in Europe in the years preceding WWII cast a different light on the human existential condition, through which alone we have access to Being. Levinas's particular conceptualisation of existence, forged at a particular world historical juncture, forms the basis for his particular 'metaphysical' account of the conditions of possibility of ethical action. Although Levinas's early essays present us with an extensive mediation on the nature of existence, only a few commentators offer it more than a mere cursory sketch. My aim in this essay is therefore to throw some light on Levinas's conceptualisation of Being from its root in Plato's understanding of essence as 'ousia', its indebtedness to Heidegger's ontological difference, and its ultimate departure from the latter's understanding of *Sein* as generosity and *Lichtung.* As we shall see, existence for Levinas is a two-sided coin that encapsulates the empowering verbal sense of Being as dynamism *and* the overpowering stultifying sense of irremissible contract in which is inscribed the exigency of an impossible escape. It is this very conceptualisation that informs Levinas's lifelong trans-ontological quest for a path otherwise and beyond Being.

"The distinction between that which exists and its existence itself… imposes itself upon philosophical reflection – and with equal facility disappears from its view. It is as though thought becomes dizzy pouring over the emptiness of the verb to exist, which we seem not to be able to say anything about, which only becomes intelligible in its participle, the existent, that which exists" (EE, 17/16).[1]

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[1] In 1946 Levinas published an article titled, "Il y a" in Deucalion I (Cahiers de Philosophie), which was incorporated into *Existence and Existents* (EE) as the Introduction and Chapter 3, section 2 ("Existence without Existents"). In all works cited by Levinas, the English page references are followed by the French page references.

1. Introducing the Being of all that there is. Levinas's ethical metaphysics found its inception in a particular conceptualisation of Being[2] – that event or act of the existence of beings that has formed the focal point of philosophical preoccupations since Western philosophy's Greek inception. Not that Levinas is insisting on a certain substantial characterisation of Being in terms of determinate traits. Being designates the verb through which alone beings may be posited. But distinct from beings, in its verbality, Being is pure affirmation: the fact that *there is,* withdrawn from all *that which is,* i.e. the fact by which there is all that there is.[3] The fact that something exists is qualified in terms of the self-unfolding act of Being. To be sure, Levinas is not merely following Plato and Heidegger here in their affirmation of the merely formal, factual 'there is'. If Levinas's idea of the Good is based on Plato's 'the Good beyond Being', then his metaphysics must be based on a notion of Being in a certain sense opposed to the Good,[4] conceived negatively as 'evil'. Evil here does not signify that which is *ethically* wrong or bad, however. For Levinas, as we shall see, that would be to confuse ontology ('to be') – which is a-ethical – with ethics or how one 'ought to be'. Rather, it signifies the inescapable reverse-side of the event of Being. All that there is, *is* by virtue of Being (its front-side), but Being is evil in its inexorability. "Transcendence", for Levinas (OB, 3/3), "is passing over to being's *other*" as is evident in the title of his second magnum opus, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence* (1974). To transcend or go beyond Being is not to escape through death though. Being and non-being are but two poles of the same axis: the void left by the death of a being, as Levinas explains, is immediately filled with anonymous Being. Something or someone might no longer exist, but existence itself, anonymous existing persists. "To be or not to be", Hamlet's dilemma, "is not the question where transcendence is concerned" (ibid.). If "Being is [an] evil" (TA, 51/139) that death cannot deliver us from, what recourse remains?

This is the very question that animates Levinas's investigations from 1935 until the end of his life. In other words, it was Levinas's youthful postulation of Being as evil – informed by his presentiment of disaster at the time of the rise of 'Hitlerism' and subsequent experience of the atrocious existential conditions of the Holocaust[5] – that set the stage for his lifelong fascination with the conditions of possibility of ethical action. If the Being that animates the being of human being-there-in-the-world is evil in its irremissibility, how then to escape from this "*most radical and unalterably binding of chains*" (OE, 55/73)? It was this quest for a way out of Being that ultimately put Levinas on the Other's

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[2] Throughout this article, I shall capitalise Being understood as existence or *Zein* to distinguish it from a being, existent or *Seiende.* This convention is, however, not always reflected in the quotations.

[3] In this regard see Jacques Rolland's "Getting out of Being by a new path", in OE, p. 11.

[4] Cf. OB, 18/22: "Arising at the apex of essence, goodness is *other* than being" and "[t]he beyond being, *being's other* or the *otherwise than being...* as been recognized as the Good by Plato" (19/23).

[5] The young Levinas witnessed the upsurge of fascist and National Socialist movements and his early forebodings articulated especially in his essay, "Reflections of the Philosophy of Hitlerism" (1934) proved to be especially prophetic.

trail. In what follows I shall attempt to elucidate Levinas's particularly complex and paradoxical conceptualisation of Being by excavating its Platonic roots and tracing its deviation from Heidegger's *Sein.* An exposition of this nature is instructive since most of the secondary literature focuses on Levinas's mature works in which he conceives of ethics as that which is otherwise of beyond Being, while affording his understanding of Being as developed in his early works only a cursory inspection, if any. Before addressing the evil flip side of Being, let us consider it in its apparent positive manifestation as unfolding dynamism.

2. Being as empowering dynamism. Levinas draws upon the Platonic term 'essence' ('ousia') to depict the event of Being.[6] As Burggraeve (2008: 15) explains, Levinas refers to the history of language where it is apparent how the suffix *ance* is derived from *antia* or *entia* to explain the content of the term 'essence'. Since as endings of the particle these indicate an act, they gave rise to the existence of abstract nouns of action. This explains Levinas's preference for the more appropriate 'ess*a*nce' in his work after OB (cf. GCM, 43/78). 'Existence' as 'ess*a*nce' therefore signifies Being in its *verb*ality as dynamism, performing, activity or unfolding: "the exercise of the activity expressed by the verb of verbs, by the verb *to be* which one lightly calls auxiliary..." (ibid.). The verb 'Being' here does not primarily refer to any real or ideal entities, but rather to the process of be-*ing* itself of these entities (OB, 23/29), the self-unfolding act of Being through the manifestation of particular beings. The event of Being shows and proclaims itself to the world through all that is, that is done, thought, or said. Essence, therefore, is affirmative, self-manifesting, self-confirming and self-proclaiming, i.e. phenomenal in its very structure (Burggraeve 2008: 17), reminiscent of Heidegger's *Lichtung des Seins* (the clearing of Being).

In the final instance, Being as empowering dynamism is not just a letting-be but also a 'determination' of all that is as *identity.* It not only comprises all that is, but permeates everything with its energy of existing. For Levinas, therefore, Being is a *totality* since it reduces all to the same despite the apparent diversity and irreconcilability of the particularities of existent data, events and things. They are all enveloped by the unfolding of essence. And if the extension of essence in all its apparent particular variations is nothing but the play of totality and identity, its inner quality must be understood in terms of the persistence *to be* or perseverance in Being of a being here-on-earth, literally *inter-esse*, i.e. self-involvement or interest. Being is the endeavour to be, work, effort, energy, what Levinas explains in terms of the Spinozian *conatus essendi*: "the desire of [a] being to be, to persevere in its being" (OB, xxxv (Translator's Introduction) or, in Levinas's own words: "the adventure of essence... consists in persisting in essence and unfolding imma-

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[6] According to Burggraeve (2008: 15), 'essence' ('ousia') should not be understood in the common meaning of 'eidos', 'quidditas' or 'essentiality'. For Levinas, as for Plato, "essence is synonymous with 'being', namely with the Heideggerian *Sein* as distinct from *Seiendes,* the Latin *esse* as distinct from the Scholastic *ens".*

nence" (OB 16/19). Burggraeve's description (2008: 16 – 17 is particularly illuminating: "*Its [Being's] identity is a striving for identity, an incessant attempt at remaining itself and becoming more and more itself. It is essential, structural immanence. It does not want to leave anything outside of itself that could disturb or threaten it; it wants to take and keep everything in hand. It is active and reductive immanence: it wants to be the one in all*". What, then, would be the flip side of this expansive and progressing event of Being?

3. Being as the need to escape. As early as 1935 in an essay titled, *On Escape* (OE), Levinas defines Being in terms of its "absolute and definitive character" and opposes this "sufficiency of being" to the "insufficiency of the human condition", which according to Levinas, has wrongly been attributed to the limitation or finitude of being (OE, 51/69). According to him, "the ground of suffering consists of the impossibility of interrupting it [the Being of one's being], and of an acute feeling of being held fast [*rivé*]" The elementary truth or brute fact that *there is being*, i.e. "the permanent quality [*l'inamovibilité*] itself of our presence" is the very source of its brutality and hence of the unbearable heaviness of Being itself. This revelation of Being as that which is definitive and cumbersome is at the same time the experience of revolt, i.e. a need for escape (ibid., pp. 52 – 53/70 – 71). Following a certain conceptualisation of Being, Levinas therefore insists that our existential condition appears as "an imprisonment" that is consequently characterised by a concomitant and fundamental need to get out of it: "*Existence is an absolute that is asserted without reference to anything else. It is identity ... In the identity of the I [moi], the identity of being reveals its nature as enchainment, for it appears in the form of suffering and invites us to escape. Thus, escape is the need to get out of oneself, that is, to break that most radical and unalterably binding of chains, the fact that the I [moi] is oneself [soi-même]*" (OE, 55/73).

Hence, the human condition is characterised as caught in an existential double bind: the absolute necessity to get out of that with which a being is inextricable bound – its very being. Escape or "excendence" (what Levinas later calls "transcendence")[7] therefore "aspires to break the chains of the I to the self [*du moi à soi*]. It is being itself or the 'oneself' from which escape flees". The full extent of this existential double bind becomes evident when, in the course of Levinas's analyses in OE it becomes clear that, although there is no way out and escape cannot be aimed at a definitive destination, his determination that a way out must and does exist never wavers. In fact, it is this very quest for and insistence upon a way out of Being – which crushes me with the intimate weight of my

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[7] In the Preface to EE Levinas still makes a distinction between "transcendence" and "excendence": "[i]t signifies that the movement which leads an existent toward the Good is not a transcendence by which that existent raises itself up to a higher existence, but a departure from Being... But excendence and the Good necessarily have a foothold in being, and that is why Being is better than non-being" (15/13).

very own being – that animates Levinas's work throughout his life. As we know, it was only four decades later in his so-called mature thought that he succeeded in "getting out of being by a new path" (OE, 73/99). Since the vast majority of commentaries on Levinas's thought are devoted precisely to the later work, in which ethics understood as the responsibility we bear towards the Other is explored as the liberation from the unbearable weight of Being by way of the imposition of an equally unbearable boundless responsibility, I shall refrain from deviating from the announced thematic focus of this exposition by addressing it in detail here.[8]

The flip side of Being, then, is the fact that it presents itself or imposes itself as horror, negativity and evil. It is the reverse side of Being as generosity [*es gibt*][9] found in Heidegger's *Sein* conceived as *Lichtung* and does not merely assert the ontological difference between Being (*Sein*) and beings (*Seiendes*), but separates the *existing-existent* couplet – to use Levinas's terms, chosen for "reasons of euphony"[10] (TA, 44/132) – in an attempt to come to an understanding of existence from a different vantage point than that of *Dasein*. What this move results in is impersonal Being without beings, Being from which beings have not yet been distinguished or Being that engulfs beings and reduces them to 'nothing' so that a boundless, anonymous and destructive sea of Being simply remains (EE, 19/19 – 20).

4. Being as/contra the *there is*? It was Heidegger's discussion of *Geworfenheit*[11] that precipitated the possibility of thinking existence and existents apart: "[o]ne must understand *Geworfenheit* as the 'fact-of-being-thrown-in' … existence" (TA, 45/133). This idea of "thrownness" suggests, according to Levinas, that the existent only appears in an existence that precedes it, "as though existence were independent of the existent, and the existent that finds itself thrown there could never become master of existence" (ibid.). Such an inundated being experiences precisely dereliction, desertion or abandonment. It is within this context that Levinas conceives of "an existing that occurs without us" – an admittedly nonsensical notion since even Levinas have to acknowledge that "existing does not exist. It is the existent that exists" (ibid., p. 46/134). In a certain sense, then,

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[8] For the nature and implications of Levinas's conceptualisation of ethical agency, see Hofmeyr, A. B. (Ed.) (2009). *Radical Passivity. Rethinking Ethical Agency in Levinas.* Dordrect: Springer. It features contributions by renowned Levinas scholars including Alphonso Lingis, Adriaan Peperzak, Bettina Bergo, Seán Hand, and Luc Anckaert.

[9] The German "there is", "*es gibt*" contains the verb *geben* which means to give (cf. E&I, 48).

[10] According to Derrida (1964: 89), "[t]his choice [of translation] will always retain a certain ambiguity: by *existent*, in effect, Levinas almost if not always understands the being which is man, being in the form of *Dasein*. Now, thus understood, the existent is not being (*Seiendes*) in general, but refers to what Heidegger calls *Existenz* – mainly because it has the same root – that is, 'the mode of Being, and precisely, the Being of the being which keeps itself open for the aperture of Being, and within it'. 'Was bedeutet 'Existenz' in *Sein und Zeit*? Das wort nennt eine Weise des Seins, und zwar das Sein desjenigen Seienden, das offen steht für die Offenheit des Seins, in der es steht, indem es sie aussteht' (Introduction to *Was ist Metaphysik)"*.

[11] See Heidegger 1962: 174, 223, 330 – 333.

Being without beings cannot properly be construed as Being, since the relation between Being and beings does not link up two independent terms. A being cannot be isolated from Being. It is (EE, 17/16). We should rather see this separation as a *Gedankenexperiment* of sorts that calls upon the imagination – notwithstanding the complicity of the imagination with Being when considered within the context of its evolution in Western philosophy – to explore the potential consequences of the principle in question:[12] "*Let us imagine all things, beings and persons, returning to nothingness. What remains after this imaginary destruction of everything is not something, but the fact that there is [le fait qu'il y a]. The absence of everything returns as a presence, as the place where the bottom has dropped out of everything, an atmospheric density, a plenitude of the void, or the murmur of silence. There is, after this destruction of things and beings, the impersonal 'field of forces' of existing. There is something that is neither subject nor substantive. The fact of existing imposes itself when there is no longer anything. And it is anonymous: there is neither anyone nor anything that takes this existence upon itself. It is impersonal like 'it is raining' or 'it is hot'. Existing returns no matter with what negation one dismisses it. There is, as the irremissibility of pure existing*" (TA, 46 – 47/134 – 135).

The *there is* is what remains when we imagine everything to be annihilated or reduced to nothingness. Existence without existents is impersonal and anonymous – neither anyone nor anything, a recalcitrant return of existing no matter what. To conceive or speak of this nonsensical, paradoxical Being without beings, Levinas employs oxymoronic descriptions – paired opposites that pose contradictions in various registers: an absence that returns as a presence, an atopic place incapable of housing anything or anyone, the abundance of what is completely empty, the vibrations of the complete absence of sound, the solidity of air. It is the very recalcitrance of this return – the persistent and absolutely unavoidable presence of absence – and its indeterminateness that constitute its acuteness (ibid., pp. 57 – 60/94 – 98).

Levinas opposes this horror of the *il y a* to Heideggerian anxiety: the fear *of* Being to the fear of nothingness, or the fear *for* Being. Anxiety in Heidegger brings about "being toward death", an orientation that authenticates that existence.[13] For him, death is the *possibility* of impossibility – of my total and definitive impotence. But ontological possibilities are not given to an impassive contemplation, but to an existence that projects itself into them: to a power. Thus, for Heidegger, the sense of my imminent possible impotence is a power and indeed constitutive of all my existence qua potentiality-for-being. The power in me to sense my mortality, is not only my most uncanny and far-reaching power, it is the very basis of all the power in me, indeed of my life qua power. It "makes possible all other possibilities" (TA, 70/165). For Nietzsche, my affirmation as immortal (via recurrence) works the apotheosis of my existence qua will to power (Nietzsche 1974: 270); for Heidegger it is my affirmation as mortal. This is why for Heidegger the most destructive experience, that of nothingness itself anticipated, is utterly productive in its effects.

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[12] Cf. EE, 57 – 58/93 – 94 in which Levinas also resorts to the imagination to conceive of the "there is".

[13] See, for example, Heidegger 1962: 307.

He seems oblivious to the fact that the approach of death may be utterly *dis*-abling. In calling my mortality the possibility of impossibility and in placing the emphasis on the "possibility" involved, Heidegger takes this possibility to be delivered over to my power; in projecting myself resolutely onto my end I momentarily become not a being faced with death but authentically potentiality-for-being (Heidegger 1962: 307). For Levinas, on the other hand, this "possibility of impossibility" is simply the approach of impossibility (TI, 234 – 235/211 – 212). To be sure, the fact that I can anticipate my death is a power, but what I anticipate is precisely my impotence, my definitive disempowerment. The "possibility of impossibility" would then be a possibility that is quite ungraspable – the extra-mundane event that will rather obliterate me not only as a power, but even as a substrate for undergoing effects (S, x-xi).

According to Levinas, the impossibility of tearing oneself away from the invading, inevitable and anonymous rustling of existence from which death cannot deliver me manifests itself in *insomnia*. When one cannot sleep, it is as if one is held by Being, held to be. It is vigilance without end (EE, 60/98).[14] The inability to sleep is the inability to retreat from the world in rest, the impossibility of escaping from oneself, of being held fast, riveted to one's own being. What bears down on one in sleeplessness is a "void of sensations [that] constitutes a mute, absolutely indeterminate menace… Before this obscure invasion it is impossible to take shelter in oneself, to withdraw into one's shell. One is exposed. The whole is open upon us. Instead of serving as our means of access to being, … [it] delivers us over to being" (ibid., p. 59/96; 63 – 67/109 – 113).[15] In EE Levinas also analyses other modalities of being such as nausea (p. 61/100), fatigue, indolence and effort (pp. 24 – 36/30 – 52). All these phenomena show a dread before Being, an impotent recoil, "an evasion and, consequently, there too, the shadow of the 'there is'" (E&I, 51)

In OE the fundamental disposition (what Heidegger refers to as a *Grundstimmung*) manifesting Being qua being, which is announced in the feeling of being riveted or held fast, is *nausea* (comparable to Sartre's sense of nausea in his seminal 1938 novel, *La Nausée)*. For Levinas, nausea is the affect provoked by driving to its limits the dramatic tension between being and the excessive need to escape, i.e. the very predicament of needing to escape but being incapable of doing so (Caygill 2002: 44 – 45). The state of nausea that precedes vomiting, and which vomiting will alleviate, "encloses us on all sides". It does not come from outside to confine us; we are revolted from within: "our depths smother beneath ourselves; our innards 'heave'" (OE, 66/89). This is the very revolting, insurmountable presence of ourselves to ourselves; and the impossibility to being what one is, the unbearable heaviness of Being – "we are at the same time riveted

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[14] In TA too Levinas refers to insomnia as "this immortality from which one cannot escape", a description which refers to the analyses in EE and which extends it to the "impossibility of death" (*cf.* TA: 48, 51/136, 139 and EE: 61 – 63/100 – 103).

[15] The consciousness of a thinking subject, with its capacity for sleep and unconsciousness, is precisely the break-up of the insomnia of anonymous Being, the possibility to take refuge in oneself so as to withdraw from Being. The very occurrence of the *there is* consists in an impossibility – the impossibility to sleep, relax, doze off, be absent.

to ourselves, enclosed in a tight circle that smothers. We are there, and there is nothing more to be done, or anything to add to this fact that we have been entirely delivered up, that everything is consumed" (ibid., pp. 66 – 67/89 – 90). Our entire being is affected in its manner of existing or relating to its own existence. Seasickness, as a particular instance of nausea, is an exemplary case in point.

We have seasickness because we are at sea, that is, we are off the coast of which we have lost sight. We are suffering from seasickness because the earth is gone – we cannot feel the ground beneath our feet – that which is supposed to give us a foothold in existence. One becomes seasick when the fact of being at sea is transformed into the feeling of having lost one's footing somehow. Drifting shoreless, we find ourselves at a loss in the bottomless sea of Being, far from any ground (OE, 19 – 21 (Rolland's Introduction)). What nausea ultimately manifests, therefore, is Being as the *there is* [*il y a*] of the *there is Being* [*il y a de l'être*] that murmurs at the depths of nothingness itself. Nausea manifests the no-thing as Being itself and manifests Being as the very act of positing itself. The nothing *is* Being imposing itself beyond any negation.[16]

It is one thing to conceive of Being from the vantage point of a being as the existential dis-orientation [*dé-paysement*] of an existent in the face of its existence. When confronted with the task of conceiving Being without beings, however, Being understood as not just that which empowers all that is, but – perhaps for Levinas more fundamentally – that which *over*powers existents as existence's horror-inducing flip side, the *there is,* the mind reels. How to conceive of that which is neither nothingness, even though there is nothing, nor (a) being (E&I, 49)? Thought experiences a kind of vertigo in its attempt to conceive of the inconceivable, "as though thought becomes dizzy pouring over the emptiness of the verb to exist" (ibid., p. 17/16) – "the absolute emptiness that one can imagine before creation" (E&I, 48).

5. If Being precedes Creation, is Being ultimately nothing but the creator God? Levinas once again resorts to the imagination to conjure the *there is* – the unthinkable but imagined void that preceded all existent things. This invocation of the chaos before creation, the darkness above the depths, echoes Genesis 1:2 in which, in the beginning, "darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters".[17] Surely the notion of creation is closely aligned to the 'front side' of Being understood as "that through which all powers and all properties are posited" (OE, 57/76). This alignment of Being with creation and by extension with a creator God is, however, complicated by Levinas's insistence that "[t]he very fact of existing refers only to itself", i.e. coming into Being, or assuming Being as one's own being is to be understood as a "self-positing" [*le fait de se poser*], "freed from any consideration of natures, qualities, or

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[16] Cf. Levinas's formulation in TI (p. 190/165): "The *negation* of all qualifiable things allows for the *resurgence* of the impersonal *there is* which, behind every negation, *returns* intact and indifferent to the degree of that negation".

[17] From the New International Version of the Bible (© 1984).

powers that are posited" (ibid.). In EE Levinas refers to a "'polarization' of *Being in general*" (18/16). He explains it in the following terms: "*For a being which has a beginning not only must a cause be found, but also what in it receives existence be explained. Not that birth would be the receiving of a deposit or gift by a preexisting subject; even creation ex nihilo which implies pure passivity on the part of the creature, imposes on it, in the instant of its upsurge, the instant of creation, an act over its Being, a subject's mastery over its attribute. Beginning is already this possession and this activity of being. An instant is not one lump; it is articulated*" (EE, 18/16 – 17).

A being understood as a polarisation or articulation reaffirms the paradoxical duality between existence and existents – paradoxical therein that, "that which exists cannot take on anything if it is not already existing". However, Levinas insists that "the truth of this 'duality'... are attested to by certain moments in human existence where the adherence of existence to an existent appears to be a cleaving" (ibid., p. 22/27). "Cleaving" has, of course, the double meaning of 'split' or 'sever' *and* 'stick fast to' as in 'cleave to'. The struggle for life is one such concrete form of an existent's adherence to existence, in which their separation already begins. This struggle is the care that a being takes for its endurance and conservation, the struggle of an already existent being for the prolongation of its existence. The human being is therefore capable of taking up a reflective attitude with regard to its existence, i.e. to take that to which it is subject, its existence, as object and in this way to effect a split between it and its existence to which it is inextricably bound. More fundamentally, however, this polarisation or articulation is evident in phenomena *prior to reflection.* For Levinas, fatigue and indolence, for example, should be understood as positions taken with regard to existence. What they manifest is a weariness, "which is a weariness of everything and everyone, and above all a weariness of oneself". In weariness existence itself weighs upon us like an irrevocable contract that bounds one to the commitment to aspire after and undertake. It is precisely in weariness that we discover the need to escape existence itself (EE, 24 – 25/30 – 31).

How does this 'self-positing,' in which the flip side of Being as unbearable heaviness manifests itself, relate to the front side of Being as 'creative' , i.e. as "that through which all powers and all properties are posited" (OE, 57/76)? Since these are two sides of the same indivisible coin, a being comes into Being *out of itself* and not by virtue of 'creative' Being or Being reduced to the Creator God. The fact that the self-unfolding, self-manifesting verbality of exist*a*nce is not an originator becomes clear in the course of TI when the existent – that which merely is – is distinguished from the ethical subject or "*creature*" that comes into being by virtue of the ethical encounter with the Other that invests the arbitrary freedom of egoism with responsibility.[18] It seems as if it is precisely

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[18] Since we cannot explore this at length here, I shall merely quote a few lines from TI in which Levinas describes the *creature* as follows: "[t]he marvel of creation does not only consist in being a creation *ex nihilo*, but in that it results in a being capable of receiving a revelation, learning that it is created, and putting itself in question. The miracle of creation lies in creating a moral being" (89/61). I shall briefly return to Levinas's notion of ethics as beyond Being in the conclusive lines of this essay.

Levinas's insistence upon Being, as the indeterminate irremissible *there is,* that mitigates against the danger of falling back into the onto-theology that Heidegger criticises.

This is precisely what Derrida accuses Levinas of in his 1964 essay "Violence and Metaphysics" (cf. p. 142)[19]. 'Onto-theo-logy'[20] is the study of Being qua being that conflates Being with the highest being. Exemplary in this regard is Aristotle's unmoved Prime Mover, the first of all substances and necessary first source of all movement, which is itself unmoved in a world of perpetual Heraclitian flux. Or Thomas Aquinas's insistence that God is Being itself, that *Ipse Actus Essendi subsistens* or 'subsisting act of Being'. As we have seen, Levinas – like Heidegger – distinguishes Being from beings, including the being that is called God. This is explicitly stated in the opening lines of EE (17/16) where "that which exists" is equated with "the individual, the genus, the collective, God, beings designated by substantives" as opposed to "[their] existence itself" or "the event or act of their existence".

Even so it can justifiably be argued that Levinas is not consistently clear in this regard. In TI, for example, Being [*l'être*] seems to be equivalent to the originary and the ultimate. In one of the conclusions, Levinas states that "Being is exteriority... or, if one prefers, alterity" (TI, 290/266). Here he resumes the ontological significance of the face (of the Other person) as the revelation of an exteriority that essentially is authority and superiority and, thus, reveals the "truth of [B]eing". Towards the end of this conclusion, however, Levinas calls this truth of Being a "surplus of truth over [B]eing and over its idea". This surplus signifies, for Levinas, "the divine intention of all truth". For him here, "exteriority is effectuated" in what he terms the "'curvature' of the intersubjective space", which he defines as "perhaps, the very presence of God (TI, 291/267). If Being, then, is equated with exteriority, and exteriority is effectuated in the deflection of the intersubjective relation (commonly understood as either opposition or absorption of the one relational term into the other), i.e. a deflection "effectuated" or brought about by a surplus of divine intention, then Being and God is inextricably linked. Here the latter is clearly not yet distinguished from the former. It is only later that Levinas unequivocally rejects the ontological claim that Being would be ultimate by opposing the Good, as beyond Being,

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[19] Derrida (1964: 142) precisely criticises Levinas of onto-theology because the latter defines the other person "the supreme existent" by virtue of "his resemblance to God".

[20] Heidegger has shown that the history of Western thought and culture since its Greek beginnings has been an "onto-theo-logy": theology in the guise of ontology. What is truly present is not the manifest unfolding of what is, but a being with more being than the passing show of existence. This pre-eminent being – idea, energeia, substance, position, concept, dialectic, will to power, will to will — is neutral, impersonal and all-encompassing, an active and transitive "exist-ing" that makes beings be. It is this Being that grants beings their *conatus essendi*, their perseverance and maintenance in being, and it grants us the openness and the light that are necessary in order to grasp them as phenomena that appear. The world is but the reflection, the re-presentation of God, substance, transcendental ego, etc. Levinas insists that ethics only comes into its own with the collapse of onto-theo-logy. For him, the critique of metaphysics indeed ends onto-theo-logical ethics, the ethics of transcendental sanction, of other worldly principles and rules. See Levinas 1985: 1 – 3 (tr. Intro). Also see TI, 42 – 48/12 – 18 for Levinas's critique of Heidegger.

to it. The overcoming of ontology, which is already underway in TI, becomes one of most important aspects of Levinas's works. However, the text of TI itself still uses two different languages, which, in part, accounts for its difficulty. In the conclusions of TI, Levinas primarily attempts a justification of the subtitle of TI: an essay on exteriority.[21] According to Peperzak (1993: 203), the way this is done could be characterised as a plea for another ontology rather than as a defence of a thought beyond ontology. These conclusions can even be interpreted as the sketch of a new onto-logic: an ontologic of the absolute relation between the Same and the Other (or between finite interiority and infinite exteriority), which should replace the Western ontologic of monistic universality.[22]

6. Concluding remarks: Beyond Being. What Levinas is renowned for – much more than for his conceptualisaiton of Being – is, of course, ethics. To be sure, he does not formulate an ethical theory as some kind of normative yardstick of what constitutes more or less desirable action. Rather, his is interested in the conditions of possibility of ethical action. In other words, given the ontological blueprint or *conatus* of human be-*ing,* i.e. the fundamental desire of a being to persevere in its being, how is it possible to notice and act upon the need of another human being that falls outside the limited scope of this self-posited, self-directed, self-involved dynamism?

Ethics, in Levinas's view, occurs 'prior' to and is even more fundamental than essence and beings, conditioning them. This is not because the good is installed in a Heaven above or an identity behind identities, for this would again fall into onto-theology, once more confusing ethics with ontology, as if what 'ought to be' somehow 'is'. Ethics never was or is anything. Its 'being' is not to be but to be *better than Being.* Ethics is precisely ethics by disturbing the complacency of Being. As we have seen, 'to be or not to be', is *not* the question. Rather, the question precisely concerns what 'ought to be', that which is *better than Being.* What 'is' (ontology) only becomes what 'ought to be', i.e. ethics only becomes possible when the existent is confronted by an*Other* being, and in this sense ethics is in the 'social' domain beyond ontology (E&I, 58). To be sure, the existent's self-positing or assumption of Being as its own being already constitutes an initial and partial escape from the anonymous *il y a*, but for a being (*inter-esse*) to undo its condition of Being (*esse*), it has to be undone by a putting-into-question of its being. This *dis-inter-estedness* is the realisation of the truly human condition in which my ontological self-interestedness is suspended to enable being-for-another (ibid., p. 100), and in this sense, for Levinas, the Good as putting the interest of another before one's own, is beyond Being. Levinas therefore remains faithful to his original, youthful conceptualisation of Being in terms of horror, calamity and evil – a notion that turned out to be a necessary condition

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[21] *Cf.* TI, 303/279: "The present work has sought to describe metaphysical exteriority".

[22] Levinas (TI, 289-290/265) summarises his book in the thesis that the "social relation" (another name for the "metaphysical relation" or "transcendence") is "the logical plot of [B]eing" (in which "Being" [*l'être*] encompasses the universe of beings as well as the beingness of all beings). Cf. Peperzak 1993: 203.

for ethics, since "excendence and the Good necessarily have a foothold in being" (EE, 15/14 [Preface]).

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Benda Hofmeyr
Department of Philosophy
University of Pretoria
Private bag X20 Hatfield
Pretoria 0028
South Africa
e-mail: benda.hofmeyr@up.ac.za
Radboud University Nijmegen
The Netherlands
e-mail: b.hofmeyr@phil.ru.nl