Emmanuel Levinas

Emmanuel Levinas was born in Lithuania in 1906. He learned Russian and Hebrew and became especially interested in the Talmud and Jewish theology. In 1923 he moved to the University of Strasbourg in France where he studied the thought of Henri Bergson and made friends with Maurice Blanchot. In 1928 he attended the seminars of Husserl and Heidegger at the University of Freiburg and in 1930 published *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl’s Phenomenology.* During World War II he served in the French army as a German and Russian translator and was made a prisoner of war in 1940. After the war he became director of the Ecole Normale Israélite Orientale. In the 1960s he was a professor of philosophy at the University of Poitiers and the University of Paris-Nanterre. In 1973 he was appointed to a chair in philosophy at the Sorbonne, where he taught until his retirement three years later. He died in 1995.

In *Totality and Infinity* (1961) Levinas argues that we do not initially experience the fact of existence as familiar. Rather, we confront the unintelligible and terrifying fact of being (the *es gibt*, there is) as the indifferent context in which the self is already always understood as an expression of the Other (*l’Autre*). But since the truly Other cannot be represented (even as that which transcends the Same or in terms of which the self is constituted in consciousness), it cannot be philosophically conceptualized or made the object of consciousness. Infinity therefore has no identity to which the self can be compared.

As Levinas explains in “Ethics as First Philosophy,” when we claim to *know* being, we make it present by representing it as the not-other. In modernity this appropriation of being *by* knowledge becomes the identification of being *and* knowledge: objects of knowledge are grasped as objects of consciousness and are thus known in terms of self-consciousness. Indeed, because the prospect of the death of the Other makes self-consciousness possible, the existence of the self is intelligible in this view (as Nietzsche argues regarding the death of God) only in terms of the death of the Other. By contrast, *thought* (prereflective, nonintentional consciousness) reveals the Other to us as the rejection of the effort to know all things in terms of the Same (i.e., the self). This antihumanist account of the death of the self rejects thinking of others merely as other selves and thus signals the death of others as well.

As phenomenologically prior to the self and the Same, the Other is the divine, the infinite that prevents the self from being understood as the same as itself. That is, the self-same is split from itself by always already being for the Other (God). So to think of the self in terms of the Other must mean to think of the self in terms of an other-self (*autrui*). This way of putting the self into question (and thus into play)
in the face of the Other is the basis on which ontological claims about the self-same are made. That is why ethics must be the foundation of ontology. The ethical relation to the other is prior to ontology because it inscribes the signifier (the self) in the speech, discourse, or “face” of the Other through which the self is called into being and functions. The identification of a thing or self is its being called into play, and its freedom consists in not having an identity that is comparable to other beings with identities. Because its ontological status is defined by its relation to others, its very being depends on its moral obligations: it is thus a conscience before being a consciousness.

In other words, the self is able to think of itself as a self in relation to other selves to the extent that it understands other selves as the Other. But unlike the infinite, the human Other is “absolutely Other” (Autrui); that is, its otherness is not an intrinsic aspect of itself, for it has no intrinsic character. The human Other is not simply another ego—as if the ego could be universalized or “idealized” as a category of selves—for that would not acknowledge the human Other as an Other: it would merely assume that the self exists prior to the human Other, constituting a model for the Other. It would thus subordinate ethics (the ground of being) to justice (which describes relations of beings).

Instead, when confronted with the nakedness of the face of the human Other, we do not see ourselves in an Other; rather, we see the exteriority and alterity in terms of which it is possible to imagine the self as an ethical being. Of course, the self’s ethical relation to the infinite and the presence of the divine in and through other persons is the basis for developing relations of justice with others. But because what the self ought to be always exceeds it (in its relation to God), the self’s existence is tainted with a bad conscience (“infinite scrupulousness”) in terms of its obligations to other persons. To focus on doing what I think I ought to do elevates the self over the Other and assumes that the Same—in Irigaray’s terms, the patriarchal order of identity—can be the basis for moral judgments. In fact, only the dictates of the Other can legitimate the actions (indeed, the very existence) of the self. Only by recognizing how alterity is essential to the self can I appreciate why it is necessary to retrieve the sense of God expressed in the Talmud and to acknowledge the failure of philosophy (especially traditional ethics) to assimilate the Other under “the totalitarianism or imperialism of the Same.”

In his 1968 essay “Substitution” (included in Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence), Levinas describes being as that which has an identity. To think of the self as a being is to think of it as some object that is the same as another object. But the only way to think of something as the same is to think of something else with which it can be compared—which means that we first have to think of an other. In that case, the self is a substitution for an other whose existence or being cannot be the same as that of the self. The self is thus “otherwise than being,” a trace of or substitution for that which has an identity. Self-consciousness consists in the cognition of the self’s significance as the embodiment of an ethical responsibility to
an other. That is, the ontological character of the self depends on how the self signifies a relationship that is "exterior" to consciousness and is "older than" the ego and the a priori. The obsession of the self with the other is really an obsession with the inconceivable maternal trace of the an-arhichic principle (αρχή) that calls it into being (and into question). In substituting itself for the other, the self is held hostage to an unlimited ethical responsibility that can be fulfilled only by an unconditioned ("religious") affirmation of others. That affirmation amounts to a denunciation of the humanistic emphasis on the ego-thing as insufficiently human because it is insufficiently moral.

Select Bibliography of Works by Emmanuel Levinas


"Substitution" (excerpt) by Emmanuel Levinas

Ich bin du, wenn
ich ich bin
Paul Celan

Principle and Anarchy. In the relationship with beings, which we call consciousness, we identify beings across the dispersion of silhouettes in which they appear; in self-consciousness we identify ourselves across the multiplicity of

temporal phases. It is as though subjective life in the form of consciousness consisted in being itself, losing itself, and finding itself again so as to possess itself by showing itself, proposing itself as a theme, exposing itself in truth. This identification is not the counterpart of any image: it is a claim of the mind, proclamation, saying, kerygma. But it is not at all arbitrary, and consequently depends on a mysterious operation of schematism, in language, which can make an ideality correspond to the dispersion of aspects and images, silhouettes or phases. To become conscious of a being is then always for that being to be grasped across an ideality and on the basis of a said. Even an empirical, individual being is broached across the ideality of logos. Subjectivity qua consciousness can thus be interpreted as the articulation of an ontological event, as one of the mysterious ways in which its "act of being" is deployed. Being a theme, being intelligible or open, possessing oneself, the moment of having in being—all that is articulated in the movement of essence, losing itself and finding itself out of an ideal principle, an ἄρχη, in its thematic exposition, being thus carries on its affair of being. The detour of ideality leads to coinciding with oneself, that is, to certainty, which remains the guide and guarantee of the whole spiritual adventure of being. But this is why this adventure is no adventure. It is never dangerous; it is self-possession, sovereignty, ἄρχη. Anything unknown that can occur to it is in advance disclosed, open, manifest, is cast in the mold of the known, and cannot be a complete surprise.

For the philosophical tradition of the West, all spirituality lies in consciousness, thematic exposition of being, knowing.

In starting with sensibility interpreted not as a knowing but as proximity, in seeking in language contact and sensibility, behind the circulation of information it becomes, we have endeavored to describe subjectivity as irreducible to consciousness and thematization. Proximity appears as the relationship with the other, who cannot be resolved into "images" or be exposed in a theme. It is the relationship with what is not disproportionate to the ἄρχη in thematization, but incommensurable with it, with what does not derive its identity from the kerygmatic logos, and blocks all schematism.

Not able to stay in a theme, not able to appear, this invisibility which becomes contact and obsession is due not to the nonsignifyingness of what is approached, but to a way of signifying quite different from that which connects exposition to sight. Here, beyond visibility there is exposed no signification that would still be thematized in its sign. It is the very transcending characteristic of this beyond that is signification. Signification is the contradictory trope of the-one-for-the-other. The-one-for-the-other is not a lack of intuition, but the surplus of responsibility. My responsibility for the other is the for of the relationship, the very signifyingness of signification, which signifies in saying before showing itself in the said. The one-for-the-other is the very signifyingness of signification! It is not that the "beyond" would be "further" than everything that appears, or "present in absence,"
or "shown by a symbol"; that would still be to be subject to a principle, to be given in consciousness. Here what is essential is a refusal to allow oneself to be tamed or domesticated by a theme. The movement going "beyond" loses its own signifyingness and becomes an immanence as soon as logos interpellates, invests, presents, and exposes it, whereas its adjacency in proximity is an absolute exteriority. Incommensurable with the present, unassemblable in it, it is always "already in the past" behind which the present delays, over and beyond the "now" which this exteriority disturbs or obsesses. This way of passing, disturbing the present without allowing itself to be invested by the δρχή of consciousness, striating with its furrows the clarity of the ostensible, is what we have called a trace.¹ Proximity is thus anarchically a relationship with a singularity without the mediation of any principle, any ideality. What concretely corresponds to this description is my relationship with my neighbor, a signifyingness which is different from the much-discussed "meaning-endowment," since signification is this very relationship with the other, the-one-for-the-other. This incommensurability with consciousness, which becomes a trace of the who knows where, is not the inoffensive relationship of knowing in which everything is equalized, nor the indifference of spatial contiguity; it is an assignation of me by another, a responsibility with regard to men we do not even know. The relationship of proximity cannot be reduced to any modality of distance or geometrical contiguity, nor to the simple "representation" of a neighbor; it is already an assignation, an extremely urgent assignation—an obligation, anachronously prior to any commitment. This anteriority is "older" than the a priori. This formula expresses a way of being affected which can in no way be invested by spontaneity: the subject is affected without the source of the affection becoming a theme of representation. We have called this relationship irreducible to consciousness obsession. The relationship with exteriority is "prior" to the act that would effect it. [...]

Obsession is irreducible to consciousness, even if it overwhelms it. In consciousness it is betrayed, but thematized by a said in which it is manifested. Obsession traverses consciousness countercurrentwise, is inscribed in consciousness as something foreign, a disequilibrium, a delirium. It undoes thematization, and escapes any principle, origin, will, or δρχή, which are put forth in every ray of consciousness. This movement is, in the original sense of the term, an-anarchical. Thus obsession can nowise be taken as a hypertrophy of consciousness.

But, as said, a return to a diffuse "field of consciousness" prior to attention. Disorder

¹ If the anarchical were not signalled in consciousness, it would reign in its own way. The anarchical is possible only when contested by language, which betrays, but conveys, its anarchy, without abolishing it, by an abuse of language.
is but another order, and what is diffuse is thematizable. Anarchy troubles being over and beyond these alternatives. It brings to a halt the ontological play which, precisely qua play, is consciousness, where being is lost and found again, and thus illuminated. In the form of an ego, anachronously delayed behind its present moment, and unable to recuperate this delay—that is, in the form of an ego unable to conceive what is “touching” it, the ascendency of the other is exercised upon the same to the point of interrupting it, leaving it speechless. Anarchy is persecution. Obsession is a persecution where the persecution does not make up the content of a consciousness gone mad; it designates the form in which the ego is affected, a form which is a deflecting from consciousness. This inversion of consciousness is no doubt a passivity—but it is a passivity beneath all passivity. It cannot be defined in terms of intentionality, where undergoing is always also an assuming, that is, an experience always anticipated and consented to, already an origin and an ρχγη. To be sure, the intentionality of consciousness does not designate voluntary intention only. Yet it retains the initiating and inchoative pattern of voluntary intention. The given enters into a thought which recognizes in it or invests it with its own project, and thus exercises mastery over it. What affects a consciousness presents itself at a distance from the first, manifests itself a priori from the first, is represented, does not knock without announcing itself, leaves, across the interval of space and time, the leisure necessary for a welcome. What is realized in and by intentional consciousness offers itself to protention and diverges from itself in retention, so as to be, across the divergency, identified and possessed. This play in being is consciousness itself: presence to self through a distance, which is both loss of self and recovery in truth. […]

The obsession we have seen in proximity conflicts with this figure of a being possessing itself in an equality, this being ρχγη. How can the passivity of obsession find a place in consciousness, which is wholly, or is in the end, freedom? For

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2 Cf. the pages Bergson has written, in Creative Evolution, concerning the notion of disorder, which deserve close attention. Subversion and revolution remain within order. This is to be compared with Hegel: what in the experience of a “new object” appears to consciousness as the “annihilation of a prior object,” the philosopher, who can see what is “behind consciousness,” sees as the result of a genesis, something coming to birth in the same dialectical order (cf. Hegel, Phenomenology of Spirit, p. 120). The movement of genesis traverses the State and issues in absolute knowledge, which fulfills consciousness. The notion of anarchy we are introducing here has a meaning prior to the political (or anti-political) meaning currently attributed to it. It would be self-contradictory to set it up as a principle (in the sense that anarchists understand it). Anarchy cannot be sovereign, like an arche. It can only disturb the State—but in a radical way, making possible moments of negation without any affirmation. The State then cannot set itself up as a Whole. But, on the other hand, anarchy can be stated. Yet disorder has an irreducible meaning, as refusal of synthesis. Cf. Otherwise than Being, p. 191, note 6.

3 Yet this is an inability which is said. Anarchy does not reign, and thus remains in ambiguity, in enigma, and leaves a trace which speech, in the pain of expression, seeks to state. But there is only a trace.
in consciousness everything is intentionally assumed. Consciousness is wholly equality (equality of self with self, but also equality in that for consciousness responsibility is always strictly measured by freedom, and is thus always limited). How in consciousness can there be an undergoing or a passion whose active source does not, in any way, occur in consciousness? This exteriority has to be emphasized. It is not objective or spatial, recuperable in immanence and thus falling under the orders of—and in the order of—consciousness; it is obsessional, non-thematizable and, in the sense we have just defined, anarchic.

It is in a responsibility that is justified by no prior commitment, in the responsibility for another—in an ethical situation—that the me-ontological and metalogical structure of this anarchy takes form, undoing the logos in which the apology by which consciousness always regains its self-control, and commands, is inserted. This passion is absolute in that it takes hold without any a priori. The consciousness is affected, then, before forming an image of what is coming to it, affected in spite of itself. In these traits we recognize a persecution; being called into question prior to questioning, responsibility over and beyond the logos of response. It is as though persecution by another were at the bottom of solidarity with another. How can such a passion take place and have its time in consciousness?

Recurrence. But consciousness, knowing of oneself by oneself, is not all there is to the notion of subjectivity. It already rests on a “subjective condition,” an identity that one calls ego or I. It is true that, when asking about the meaning of this identity, we have the habit of denouncing it in a reified substance, or of finding in it once again the for-itself of consciousness. In the traditional teaching of idealism, subject and consciousness are equivalent concepts. The who or the me are not even suspected. This one is a non-relation, but absolutely a term. Yet this term of an irreversible assignation is perhaps dissimulated, under the outdated notion of the soul. It is a term not reducible to a relation, but yet is in recurrence. The ego is in itself like a sound that would resound in its own echo, the node of a wave which is not once again consciousness. The term in recurrence will be sought here beyond or on the hither side of consciousness and its play, beyond or on the hither side of being which it thematizes, outside of being, and thus in itself

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4 It is a relationship without any a priori which arises from a spontaneity, not from that which ontology requires in a finite thought. For, in order to welcome entities finite thought, a pure receptivity, must operate as a transcendental imagination, formative of the imaginary.

5 It is not a question here of descending toward the unconscious, which, defined in a purely negative way with reference to the conscious, preserves the structure of self-knowledge (whatever be the unexpected ramifications that would then complicate this structure), of a quest of self, though it be led astray on obstructed byways. The unconscious remains a play of consciousness, and psychoanalysis means to ensure its outcome, against the troubles that come to it from repressed desires, in the name of the very rules of this game. The play of consciousness does indeed involve rules, but irresponsibility in the game is declared to be a sickness. The play of consciousness is a game par excellence, “transcendental imagination,” but as such source of phantasms.
as in exile. It will be found under the effect of an expulsion, whose positive meaning has to be explicated. Under the effect of such an expulsion outside of being, it is in itself. There is expulsion in that it assigns me before I show myself, before I set myself up. I am assigned without recourse, without fatherland, already sent back to myself, but without being able to stay there, compelled before commencing. Nothing here resembles self-consciousness. It has meaning only as an upsurge in me of a responsibility prior to commitment, that is, a responsibility for the other. There I am one and irreplaceable, one inasmuch as irreplaceable in responsibility. This is the underside of a fabric woven where there is consciousness and which takes place in being. [. . .]

The oneself has not issued from its own initiative, as it claims in the plays and figures of consciousness on the way to the unity of an Idea. In that idea, coinciding with itself, free inasmuch as it is a totality which leaves nothing outside, and thus, fully reasonable, the oneself posits itself as an always convertible term in a relation, a self-consciousness. But the oneself is hypostasized in another way. It is bound in a knot that cannot be undone in a responsibility for others. This is an anarchic plot, for it is neither the underside of a freedom, a free commitment undertaken in a present or a past that could be remembered, nor slave’s alienation, despite the gestation of the other in the same, which this responsibility for the other signifies. In the exposure to wounds and outrages, in the feeling proper to responsibility, the oneself is provoked as irreplaceable, as devoted to the others, without being able to resign, and thus as incarnated in order to offer itself, to suffer and to give. It is thus one and unique, in passivity from the start, having nothing at its disposal that would enable it to not yield to the provocation. It is one, reduced to itself and as it were contracted, expelled into itself outside of being. [. . .]

Prior to the return to itself proper to consciousness, this hypostasis, when it shows itself, does so under the borrowed mask of being. The event in which this unity or uniqueness of the hypostasis is brought out is not the grasping of self in consciousness. It is an assignation to answer without evasions, which assigns the self to be a self. Prior to the play of being, before the present, older than the time of consciousness that is accessible in memory, in its “deep yore, never remote enough,” the oneself is exposed as a hypostasis, of which the being it is as an entity is but a mask. It bears its name as a borrowed name, a pseudonym, a pro-noun. In itself, the oneself is the one or the unique separated from being.

The oneself proper to consciousness is then not again a consciousness, but a term in hypostasis. It is by this hypostasis that the person, as an identity unjustifiable by itself and in this sense empirical or contingent, emerges substantively. In its stance it is resistant to the erosion of time and history, that is, struck by a death always violent and premature. An identity prior to the for-itself, it is not the reduced or germinal model of the relationship of oneself with oneself that cognition is. Neither a vision of oneself by oneself, nor a manifestation of oneself to oneself, the oneself does not coincide with the identifying of truth, is not stable in terms of ipseity [to show material turning
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terms of consciousness, discourse and intentionality. The unjustifiable identity of ipseity [thisness] is expressed in terms such as ego, I, oneself, and, this work aims to show throughout, starting with the soul, sensibility, vulnerability, maternity and materiality, which describe responsibility for others. The “fulcrum” in which this turning of being back upon itself which we call knowing or mind is produced thus designates the singularity par excellence. It can indeed appear in an indirect language, under a proper name, as an entity, and thus put itself on the edge of the generality characteristic of all said, and there refer to essence. But it is first a non-quiddity, no one, clothed with purely borrowed being, which masks its nameless singularity by conferring on it a role. The locus of support for the mind is a personal pronoun. If the return to self proper to cognition, the original truth of being, consciousness, can be realized, it is because a recurrence of ipseity has already been produced. This is an inversion in the process of essence, a withdrawing from the game that being plays in consciousness. It is a withdrawal-in-one-self which is an exile in oneself, without a foundation in anything else, a non-condition. This withdrawal excludes all spontaneity, and is thus always already effected, already past. Ipseity is not an abstract point, the center of a rotation, identifiable on the basis of the trajectory traced by this movement of consciousness, but a point already identified from the outside, not having to identify itself in the present nor to state its identity, already older than the time of consciousness.

The identity already realized, the “fact” or the “already done” that the oneself contributes to consciousness and knowing, does not refer mythically to a duration prior to duration, to a fabric that would still be loose enough so as to permit the flexion upon oneself of the for-itself. The for-itself is a torsion irreducible to the beating of self-consciousness, the relaxing and recovering proper to the same. The oneself comes from a past that could not be remembered, not because it is situated very far behind, but because the oneself, incommensurable with consciousness which is always equal to itself, is not “made” for the present. The oneself, an inequality with itself, a deficit in being, a passivity or patience and, in its passivity not offering itself to memory, not affecting retrospective contemplation, is in this sense undecidable, with an undecidability which is not that of a pure actuality. It is the identity of the singular, modified only in the erosion of ageing, in the permanence of a loss of self. It is unsayable, and thus unjustifiable. These negative qualifications of the subjectivity of the oneself do not consecrate some ineffable mystery, but confirm the presynthetic, pre-logical and in a certain sense atomic, that is, individual, unity of the self, which prevents it from splitting, separating itself from itself so as to contemplate or express itself, and thus show itself, if only under a comic mask, to name itself otherwise than by a pro-noun. This prevention is the positivity of the one. It is in a certain sense atomic, for it is without any rest in itself, “more and more one,” to the point of breakup, fission, openness. That this unity be a torsion and a restlessness, irreducible to the function that the oneself exercises in the ontology accomplished by consciousness, which, by the oneself,
operates its turning back over itself, presents a problem. It is as though the atomic unity of the subject were exposed outside by breathing, by divesting its ultimate substance even to the mucous membrane of the lungs, continually splitting up.

The oneself does not rest in peace under its identity, and yet its restlessness is not a dialectical scission, nor a process equalizing difference. Its unity is not just added on to some content of ipseity, like the indefinite article which substantifies even verbs, "nominalizing" and thematizing them. Here the unity precedes every article and every process; it is somehow itself the content. Recurrence is but an "outgoing" of unity. As a unity in its form and in its content, the oneself is a singularity, prior to the distinction between the particular and the universal. It is, if one likes, a relationship, but one where there is no disjunction between the terms held in relationship, a relationship that is not reducible to an intentional openness upon oneself, does not purely and simply repeat consciousness in which being is gathered up, as the sea gathers up the waves that wash the shore. The ego is not in itself like matter which, perfectly espoused by its form, is what it is; it is in itself like one is in one’s skin, that is, already tight, ill at ease in one’s own skin. It is as though the identity of matter resting in itself concealed a dimension in which a retreat to the hither side of immediate coincidence were possible, concealed a materiality more material than all matter—a materiality such that irritability, susceptibility or exposedness to wounds and outrage characterizes its passivity, more passive still than the passivity of effects. Maternity in the complete being "for the other" which characterizes it, which is the very signifyingness of significiation, is the ultimate sense of this vulnerability. [. . .]

*The Self.* Returning now to the theme of the first part of this exposition, we have to ask if this folding back upon oneself proper to ipseity (which does not even have the virtue of being an act of folding itself, but makes the act of consciousness turning back upon itself possible), this passive folding back, does not coincide with the anarchic passivity of an obsession. Is not obsession a relationship with the outside which is prior to the act that would open up this exterior? The total passivity of obsession is more passive still than the passivity of things, for in their "prime matter" things sustain the kerygmatic logos that brings out their outlines in matter. In falling under this saying that ordains, matter takes on meaning, and shows itself to be this or that—a thing. This fall—or, this case—a pure surrender to the logos, without regard for the propositions that will make of the thing a narrative to which the logos belongs, is the essence of the accusative. The logos that informs prime matter in calling it to order is an accusation, or a category. But obsession is anarchical; it accuses me beneath the level of prime matter. For as a category takes hold of matter, it takes as its model still what resistance, impenetrability, or potency remains in that matter, that "being in potency." Prime matter, presented as a being in potency, is still potency, which the form takes into account. It is not by chance that Plato teaches us that matter is eternal, and that for Aristotle matter is a *cause*; such is the truth for the order of things. Western philosophy, which perhaps is
reification itself, remains faithful to the order of things and does not know the absolute passivity, beneath the level of activity and passivity, which is contributed by the idea of creation. Philosophers have always wished to think of creation in ontological terms, that is, in function of a preexisting and indestructible matter.

In obsession the accusation effected by categories turns into an absolute accusative in which the ego proper to free consciousness is caught up. It is an accusation without foundation, to be sure, prior to any movement of the will, an obsessional and persecuting accusation. It strips the ego of its pride and the dominating imperialism characteristic of it. The subject is in the accusative, without recourse in being, expelled from being, outside of being, like the one in the first hypotheses of Parmenides, without a foundation, reduced to itself, and thus without condition. In its own skin. Not at rest under a form, but tight in its skin, encumbered and as it were stuffed with itself, suffocating under itself, insufficiently open, forced to detach itself from itself, to breathe more deeply, all the way, forced to dispossess itself to the point of losing itself. Does this loss have as its term the void, the zero point and the peace of cemeteries, as though the subjectivity of a subject meant nothing? Or do the being encumbered with oneself and the suffering of constriction in one’s skin, better than metaphors, follow the exact trope of an alteration of essence, which inverts, or would invert, into a recurrence in which the expulsion of self outside of itself is its substitution for the other? Is not that what the self emptying itself of itself would really mean? This recurrence would be the ultimate secret of the incarnation of the subject; prior to all reflection, prior to every positing, an indebtedness before any loan, not assumed, anarchical, subjectivity of a bottomless passivity, made out of assignation, like the echo of a sound that would precede the resonance of this sound. The active source of this passivity is not thematizable. It is the passivity of a trauma, but one that prevents its own representation, a deafening trauma, cutting the thread of consciousness which should have welcomed it in its present, the passivity of being persecuted. This passivity deserves the epithet of complete or absolute only if the persecuted one is liable to answer for the persecutor. The face of the neighbor in its persecuting hatred can by this very malice obsess as something pitiful. Only the persecuted one, the one who is without any references, recourse or help (that is its uniqueness or its identity as unique!), the one who does not evade this equivocation or enigma, can endure it. To undergo from the other is an absolute patience only if by this from-the-other is already for-the-other. This transfer, other than interested, “otherwise than essence,” is subjectivity itself. “To give his cheek to the smiter and to be filled with insults,” to demand suffering in the suffering undergone (without producing the act that would be the exposing of the other cheek) is not to draw from

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6 This freedom enveloped in a responsibility which it does not succeed in shouldering is the way of being a creature, the unlimited passivity of a self, the unconditionality of a self.

7 Lamentations 3:30.
suffering some kind of magical redemptive virtue. In the trauma of persecution it is to pass from the outrage undergone to the responsibility for the persecutor, and, in this sense from suffering to expiation for the other. Persecution is not something added to the subjectivity of the subject and his vulnerability; it is the very movement of recurrence. The subjectivity as the other in the same, as an inspiration, is the putting into question of all affirmation for oneself, all egoism born again in this very recurrence. (This putting into question is not a preventing!) The subjectivity of a subject is responsibility of being-in-question in the form of the total exposure to offense in the cheek offered to the smiter. This responsibility is prior to dialogue, to the exchange of questions and answers, to the thematization of the said, which is superposed on my being put into question by the other in proximity, and in the saying proper to responsibility is produced as a digression. [...]

Responsibility for another is not an accident that happens to a subject, but precedes essence in it, has not awaited freedom, in which a commitment to another would have been made. I have not done anything and I have always been under accusation—persecuted. The ipseity, in the passivity without arche characteristic of identity, is a hostage. The word I means here I am, answering for everything and for everyone. Responsibility for the others has not been a return to oneself, but an exasperated contracting, which the limits of identity cannot retain. Recurrence becomes identity in breaking up the limits of identity, breaking up the principle of being in me, the intolerable rest in itself characteristic of definition. The self is on the hither side of rest; it is the impossibility to come back from all things and concern oneself only with oneself. It is to hold on to oneself while gnawing away at oneself. Responsibility in obsession is a responsibility of the ego for what the ego has not wished, that is, for the others. This anarchy in the recurrence to oneself is beyond the normal play of action and passion in which the identity of a being is maintained, in which it is. It is on the hither side of the limits of identity. This passivity undergone in proximity by the force of an alterity in me is the passivity of a recurrence to oneself which is not the alienation of an identity betrayed. What can it be but a substitution of me for the others? It is, however, not an alienation, because the other in the same is my substitution for the other through responsibility, for which I am summoned as someone irreplaceable. I exist through the other and for the other, but without this being alienation: I am inspired. This inspiration is the psyche. The psyche can signify this alterity in the same without alienation in the form of incarnation, as being-in-one's-skin, having-the-other-in-one's-skin.

8 In Otrepiev's dream, twice repeated, in Pushkin's Boris Godunov, the false Dmitri catches sight of his future sovereignty in the equivocal laughter of the people: "from above Moscow appeared to me like an anthill, below the people were boiling and pointed to me and laughed. I was overcome with shame and fear and in throwing myself down head first, I awoke." Laughter at the bottom of the gesture that points me out, shame and fear of the ego, the "accusative" where everything designates me and assigns me, awakening in a headlong fall—all this is the unconditionality of the subject behind its sovereignty.
In this substitution, in which identity is inverted, this passivity more passive still than the passivity conjoined with action, beyond the inert passivity of the designated, the self is absolved of itself. Is this freedom? It is a different freedom from that of an initiative. Through substitution for others, the oneself escapes relations. At the limit of passivity, the oneself escapes passivity or the inevitable limitation that the terms within relation undergo. In the incomparable relationship of responsibility, the other no longer limits the same, it is supported by what it limits. Here the overdetermination of the ontological categories is visible, which transforms them into ethical terms. In this most passive passivity, the self liberates itself ethically from every other and from itself. Its responsibility for the other, the proximity of the neighbor, does not signify a submission to the non-ego; it means an openness in which being’s essence is surpassed in inspiration. It is an openness of which expiration is a modality or a foretaste, or, more exactly, of which it retains the aftertaste. Outside of any mysticism, in this expiration, the possibility of every sacrifice for the other, activity and passivity coincide. [. . .] 

Responsibility for the other, this way of answering without a prior commitment, is human fraternity itself, and it is prior to freedom. The face of the other in proximity, which is more than representation, is an unrepresentable trace, the way of the infinite. It is not because among beings there exists an ego, a being pursuing ends, that being takes on signification and becomes a universe. It is because in an approach there is inscribed or written the trace of infinity, the trace of a departure: but trace of what is inordinate, does not enter into the present, and inverts the arché into anarchy, that there is forsakenness of the other, obsession by him, responsibility and a self. The non-interchangeable par excellence, the I, the unique one, substitutes itself for others. Nothing is a game. Thus being is transcended.

The ego is not just a being endowed with certain qualities called moral which it would bear as a substance bears attributes, or which it would take on as accidents in its becoming. Its exceptional uniqueness in the passivity or the passion of the self is the incessant event of subjectification to everything, of substitution. It is a being

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9 All the descriptions of the face in the three final studies of the second edition of our book En découvrant l’existence avec Husserl et Heidegger which describe the very ambiguity or enigma of anarchy—the ideality of infinity in the face as the trace of the withdrawal which the infinite qua infinite effects before coming, and which addresses the other to my responsibility—remain descriptions of the non-thematizable, the anarchical, and, consequently, do not lead to any theological thesis. Language can none the less speak of it, if only by an abuse of language, and it thus confirms the fact that it is impossible for the anarchical to be constituted as a sovereignty—which implies the unconditionality of anarchy. But the hold of language on the anarchical is not a mastery, for otherwise anarchy would be subordinate to the arché of consciousness. This hold is the struggle and pain of expression. Whence comes discourse and the necessity of the arché of sovereignty and of the State; we shall speak of that further (chapter V of Otherwise than Being, pp. 156ff.). It is clear also that in our way of interpreting signifyingness, the practical order (and the religious which is inseparable from the practical) is defined by the anarchical. Theology would be possible only as the contestation of the purely religious, and confirms it only by its failures or its struggles.
divesting itself, emptying itself of its being, turning itself inside out, and if it can be put thus, the fact of “otherwise than being.” This subjection is neither nothingness, nor a product of a transcendental imagination. In this analysis we do not mean to reduce an entity that would be the ego to the act of substituting itself that would be the being of this entity. Substitution is not an act; it is a passivity inconvertible into an act, the hither side of the act-passivity alternative, the exception that cannot be fitted into the grammatical categories of noun or verb, save in the said that thematizes them. This recurrence can be stated only as an in-itself, as the underside of being or as otherwise than being. To be oneself, otherwise than being, to be disinterested, is to bear the wretchedness and bankruptcy of the other, and even the responsibility that the other can have for me. To be oneself, the state of being a hostage, is always to have one degree of responsibility more, the responsibility for the responsibility of the other.

Why does the other concern me? What is Hecuba to me? Am I my brother’s keeper? These questions have meaning only if one has already supposed that the ego is concerned only with itself, is only a concern for itself. In this hypothesis it indeed remains incomprehensible that the absolute outside of-me, the other, would

10 One could be tempted to take substitution to be the being of the entity that is the ego. And, to be sure, the hither side of the ego lends itself to our speaking only by referring to being, from which it withdraws and which it undoes. The said of language always says being. But in the moment of an enigma language also breaks with its own conditions, as in a sceptical saying, and says a signification before the event, a before-being. Events happen to subjects that undergo or provoke them. The verbs by which the events are said and the nouns by which the subjects are said are formalized, even the verb being, even the noun being. The homonymy is here an extreme amphitryon in which the difference rests not on a common genus, but uniquely on the commonness of the word. Language thus shows itself to be something quite different from a doubling up of thoughts. The oneself and substitution do not enter into this framework. The detection or already the defeat of the identity of the ego, which can finally be said to be the event of the oneself, precedes every event undergone or conducted by a subject. ‘On the hither side’ is expressed precisely in the term anarchy. It is identity undone to the limit, without being remade in the other, prior to a transubstantiation into another avatar and prior to the putting in place of an other. For it does not rest in the other, but remains in itself without rest. There is a requisition with no escape possible, which, as the irreparable one itself is uniqueness.

11 The vortex—suffering of the other, my pity for his suffering, his pain over my pity, my pain over his pain, etc.—stops at me. The I is what involves one movement more in this iteration. My suffering is the cynosure of all the sufferings—and of all the faults, even of the fault of my persecutors, which amounts to suffering the ultimate persecution, suffering absolutely. This is not a purifying fire of suffering, which magically would count here. This element of a “pure born,” for nothing, in suffering, is the passivity of suffering which prevents its reverting into suffering assumed, in which the for-the-other of sensibility, that is, its very sense, would be annulled. This moment of the “for nothing” in suffering is the surplus of nonsense over sense by which the sense of suffering is possible. The incarnation of the self and its possibilities of gratuitous pain must be understood in function of the absolute accusative characteristic of the self, a passivity prior to all passivity at the bottom of matter becoming flesh. But in the anarchic character of suffering, and prior to all reflection, we have to catch sight of a suffering of suffering, a suffering because of what is pitiful in my suffering, which is a suffering “for God” who suffers from my suffering. There is an anarchic trace of God in passivity.


12 Cf. Otho.
concern me. But in the "prehistory" of the ego posited for itself speaks a responsibility. The self is through and through a hostage, older than the ego, prior to principles. What is at stake for the self, in its being, is not to be. Beyond egoism and altruism it is the religiosity of the self.

It is through the condition of being hostage that there can be in the world pity, compassion, pardon and proximity—even the little there is, even the simple "After you, sir." The unconditionality of being hostage is not the limit case of solidarity, but the condition for all solidarity. Every accusation and persecution, as all interpersonal praise, recompense, and punishment, presupposes the subjectivity of the ego, substitution, the possibility of putting oneself in the place of the other, which refers to the transference from the "by the other" into a "for the other," and in persecution from the outrage inflicted by the other to the expiation for his fault by me. But the absolute accusation, prior to freedom, constitutes freedom which, allied to the Good, situates beyond and outside of all essence. [...] Subjectivity is being hostage. This notion reverses the position where the presence of the ego to itself appears as the beginning or as the conclusion of philosophy. This coinciding in the same, where I would be an origin, or, through memory, a covering over of the origin, this presence, is, from the start, undone by the other. The subject resting on itself is confounded by wordless accusation. For in discourse it would have already lost its traumatic violence. The accusation is in this sense persecuting; the persecuted one can no longer answer it. More exactly, it is accusation which I cannot answer, but for which I cannot decline responsibility. Already the position of the subject is a deposition, not a conatus essendi. It is from the first a substitution by a hostage expiating for the violence of the persecution itself. We have to conceive in such terms the de-substantiation of the subject, its de-reification, its disinterestedness, its subjection, its subjectivity. It is a pure self, in the accusative, responsible before there is freedom. Whatever be the ways that lead to the superstructure of society, in justice the dissymmetry that holds me at odds with regard to the other will find again law, autonomy, equality.

To say that the ego is a substitution is then not to state the universality of a principle, the quiddity of an ego, but, quite the contrary, it is to restore to the soul its egoity which supports no generalization. The way by which, from this situation, the logos arises to the concept of the ego passes through the third party. The subject as an ego is not an entity provided with egoity as an ictic structure, which should make it possible to form a concept of it, and make the singular entity be its realization.

12 Cf. Otherwise than Being, ch. V, sect. 3. I cannot detach myself from the self, that is, suspend the responsibility that is incumbent on me and on no one else, independently of the questions and answers of free dialogue, which persecution paralyzes without annulling responsibility, whereas I can pardon others, among their alienity inasmuch as they are subsumed under the concept of the ego. Here there is a priority of the self before all freedom (or non-freedom).
Modern antihumanism, which denies the primacy that the human person, free and for itself, would have for the signification of being, is true over and beyond the reasons it gives itself. It clears the place for subjectivity positing itself in abnegation, in sacrifice, in a substitution which precedes the will. Its inspired intuition is to have abandoned the idea of person, goal and origin of itself, in which the ego is still a thing because it is still a being. Strictly speaking, the other is the end; I am a hostage, a responsibility and a substitution supporting the world in the passivity of assignation, even in an accusing persecution, which is undecidable. Humanism has to be denounced only because it is not sufficiently human.

Will it be said that the world weighs with all its suffering and all its fault on the ego because this ego is a free consciousness, capable of sympathy and compassion? Will it be said that only a free being is sensitive to the weight of the world that weighs on it? Let us admit for a moment a free ego, capable of deciding for solidarity with others. At least it will be recognized that this freedom has no time to assume this urgent weight, and that consequently it is as checked or undone under the suffering. It is impossible to evade the appeal of the neighbor, to move away. One approaches the other perhaps in contingency, but henceforth one is not free to move away from him. The assumption of the suffering and the fault of another nowise goes beyond the passivity: it is a passion. This condition or unconditionality of being a hostage will then at least be an essential modality of freedom, the first, and not an empirical accident of the freedom, proud in itself, of the ego.

To be sure—but this is another theme—my responsibility for all can and has to manifest itself also in limiting itself. The ego can, in the name of this unlimited responsibility, be called upon to concern itself also with itself. The fact that the other, my neighbor, is also a third party with respect to another, who is also a neighbor, is the birth of thought, consciousness, justice and philosophy. The unlimited initial responsibility, which justifies this concern for justice, for oneself, and for philosophy can be forgotten. In this forgetting consciousness is a pure egoism. But egoism is neither first nor last. The impossibility of escaping God, the adventure of Jonah indicates that God is at least here not a value among values. (I pronounce the word God without suppressing the intermediaries that lead me to this word, and, if I can say so, the anarchy of his entry into discourse, just as phenomenology states concepts without ever destroying the scaffolds that permit one to climb up to them.) The impossibility of escaping God lies in the depths of myself as a self, as an absolute passivity. This passivity is not only the possibility of death in being, the possibility of impossibility. It is an impossibility prior to that possibility, the impossibility of slipping away, absolute susceptibility, gravity without any frivolity. It is the birth of a meaning in the obtuseness of being, of a “being able to die” subject to sacrifice.

The self inasmuch as, in an approach, it abrogates the egoism of perseverance in being, which is the imperialism of the ego, introduces meaning into being. There could be no meaning in being which could not be measured to being. Mortality
renders senseless any concern that the ego would have for its existence and its destiny. It would be but an evasion in a world without issue, and always ridiculous. No doubt nothing is more comical than the concern that a being has for an existence it could not save from its destruction, as in Tolstoy's tale where an order for enough boots for twenty-five years is sent by one who will die the very evening he gives his order. That is absurd as questioning, in view of action, the stars whose verdict would be without appeal. But through this image one sees that the comical is also tragic, and that it belongs to the same man to be a tragic and a comical personage.

The approach, inasmuch as it is a sacrifice, confers a sense on death. In it the absolute singularity of the responsible one encompasses the generality or generalization of death. In it life is no longer measured by being, and death can no longer introduce the absurd into it. Death gives lie to pleasure, in which for the space of an instant the tragi-comedy is forgotten, and which would be defined by this forgetting. But despite all its adversity, it is accorded with the for-the-other of approach. No one is so hypocritical as to claim that he has taken from death its sting, not even the promisers of religions. But we can have responsibilities and attachments through which death takes on a meaning. That is because, from the start, the other affects us despite ourselves.

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