

Phenomenon and Infinity

Marc Richir

Introduction: Phenomenology and Ethical Interruption

Without a doubt no one has gone as far in radically questioning and taking account of Heidegger's work, from *Being and Time* to his later philosophy, as Levinas. It is also true that no one else has been better at expressing not only the offense but also the *outrage* that Heidegger's work has done to the work of Husserl. Even if for Levinas there is no question of returning to the problems and aporias of the science of the transcendental ego, *his work* (which—as we are aware—leads overtly to a sort of anti-Heideggerian rehabilitation of subjectivity) nonetheless represents something like a posthumous avenging of Husserl where the difficulties of his philosophy of the ego explicitly find an original response. This response gives back some meaning to that which the founder of phenomenology—due to his nearly blind obstinacy in maintaining the *ego* or the self in a profundity which puts it outside the world, or, in his terms, in some way outside of intentionality—had vaguely prefigured without fully realizing it. Of course, this is not meant to indicate that one should see Husserl as a 'precursor' to Levinas or Levinas as a 'pupil' of Husserl; for if Levinas was a 'pupil,' it was—as far as philosophy is concerned—of phenomenology in its entirety. One would also find in his work, if one wanted, many features which are 'formally' Heideggerian. This is very striking in the semantic shiftings which common terms undergo: terms such as "face," "responsibility," "hostage," "persecution," "accusative," "substitution," for example, where one knows that one is passing from the dimension of experience in presence to *an entirely new sensibility of the ethical* by way of a difference which is uncontrollable because it is nameless. This dif-

This essay first appeared as "Phénomène et infini" in *Cahier de l'Herne: Emmanuel Lévinas*, eds. Catherine Chalier and Miguel Abensour (Paris: Editions de l'Herne, 1991), pp. 224-56. The editors gratefully acknowledge the generosity of the author in granting permission to translate and publish this essay. Certain translations of Levinas have been modified throughout to remain as close, thematically, to Richir's text as possible.

ference can lead, as it did with Heidegger, to every misinterpretation possible, of which the greatest would be to make the ethical dimension into a sort of ontological hypostasis of the second level, an ‘over-being.’

All of this is to say that Levinas has meditated profoundly upon the subject of phenomenology; though this aspect is usually neglected when overshadowed by his other source of inspiration, namely, Judaism. Insofar as we do not feel the least bit competent to comment on the latter source, we shall confine ourselves here to the former, especially to the sort of Promethean struggle which Levinas, for his entire life, has led against Heidegger’s “evidence.”¹ The historical weight of this evidence and its crushing impact on what is called “the phenomenological movement” is probably not sufficiently understood. For one who reads closely, *Otherwise than Being* teems with allusions more or less clearly directed at Heidegger. This is so because it is here a question of thinking in opposition to him, that is to say close to Heidegger while also countering him, that leads Levinas to reflect—and thus even sometimes, as we shall see, to a certain dependence—not on the foundations of Heidegger’s thought but on the somewhat too fixed status of his phenomenology. This in turn leads to a dependency on that which appears there as the beyond of this phenomenology. This sort of second level ‘fascination’ in no way impedes the extreme lucidity which comes from a long and patient frequenting:

In all the compunction of Heidegger’s magical language and the impressionism of his play of lights and shadows, and the mystery of light that comes from behind the curtains, in all this tip-toe or wolf-stepping movement of discourse, where the extreme prudence to not frighten the game perhaps dissimulates the impossibility of flushing it out, where each contact is only tangency, does poetry succeed in reducing the rhetoric? (AE 230; OB 182)

On the other hand, Levinas follows this up on the next page:

Our analyses claim to be in the spirit of Husserlian philosophy, whose letter has been the recall in our epoch of the permanent phenomenology, restored to its rank of being a method for all philosophy. Our presentation of notions . . . remains faithful to intentional analysis, insofar as it signifies the locating of notions in the horizon of their appearing, a horizon unrecognized, forgotten or displaced in the exhibition of an object, in its notion, in the look absorbed by the notion alone. The Said in which everything is thematized . . . has to be reduced to the signification of Saying, beyond the simple correlation which is set up between the Saying and the Said (AE 230-1; OB 183).

And we know that for Levinas the “particular meaning of Saying,” a meaning with no thematic signified and which has nothing of an *apophasis*, is ethical meaning. It is in this sense that ethical language

indicates the “interruption” of phenomenology, an irretrievable Diachrony in the temporalization of the theme, or a “non-synchronizable diachrony” in the Same of that which appears (AE 120n.35; OB 193n.35). The ethical dimension is thus required by phenomenology as its beyond—beyond essence (meaning by ‘essence’ being in so far as it is different than the existent [AE ix; OB xli])—which is at the same time the only thing which can make sense of it, and this by way of a recourse to justice, which is the true location of the foundation of essence—of the *esse* or *essance* of all that is (AE ix; OB xli).

In what way is that which we call the ‘ethical dimension’ required by the very movement of phenomenology? This is what we must first examine, because it is from this question that the ‘terms’ of the ethical (that which is most often subordinated to essence by traditional philosophy) are going to put themselves ‘in motion’ in order to show themselves in their foundational (or better, for our purposes, instituting) dimension in the double relation of an ‘I’ that is irreducible to the other and to God, and where the enigma of ipseity is put into question at its very depths—though in a manner that is completely different than that of Heidegger.

Essence and Diachrony

Levinas’s fundamental thesis regarding phenomenology is, we think, that the phenomenon always consists in a *stasis* of the Same, which is even an ec-stasis, insofar as the subjectivity—the ‘who’ for whom there is an appearing—is supposed to be absorbed or lose itself there as a ‘moment’ of the appearing or manifesting. This is a more or less complex and amphibological stasis since it is liable to ‘circulate’ in its instability from the stasis of the verb “to be” in the ‘originary’ *apophansis* which, to the extent to which it is a temporalization (that is, a synchronization) is a phenomenon of manifesting (which already makes itself phenomeno-logy, *logos* of the phenomenon, a pure verb or movement, the essence of which the verb ‘to be’ is supposed to hold within itself), to a stasis which is already secondary, nominalized, and fixed in the thing or the state of the eidetic things to which the *apophantic* in the Aristotelian or Husserlian sense corresponds. The amphibology is, as Levinas constantly reminds us, that of being and beings, of the pure movement of the appearing in its stasis from the Same to the Same, to the result or residue of the appearing as such in the appearance of such and such a being, fixed and recognized in the eidetic, that is, equally thus fixed in pure logic. What properly belongs to this stasis going from the Same to the Same is the temporalization of itself in a temporal phase, namely, presence. It is a presence which is supposed to be homo-

geneous insofar as it carries in itself *its* memory—its retentional past—and *its* anticipation—its protentional future. Phenomenology is thus *tautological*. This can be seen in what Heidegger himself emphasized to the very end in his insistence on the fact that the Parmenidean identity of thought and being means nothing other than the following: to think being is, so to speak, “to accompany” it by being absorbed there, in the movement of the Same to the Same, a silent and unnoticed movement by which there is an appearance. It can also be seen in that which Husserl had already recognized in the *Logical Investigations*, namely, that if language purifies itself to the point of a *logos* of pure logic, this *logos* is *apophantic* in the sense that the degrees of the meaning in thought (concepts, meanings) are supposed to be identical with the degrees of the meaning of being (the *eide*, the state of things of which the only definition is to be eidetic). This results, as Levinas very clearly recognized, in a division of language into verbs and nouns; a division which is as fluent as the amphibology of being and beings. Indeed, following Heidegger, one might say (simplifying a bit) that one would polarize language towards the verb, in which the verb in general would be the verb ‘to be,’ but with the ever present risk (which is clearly the Heideggerian risk) of ultimately nominalizing it as the very place of thought. Following Husserl (still according to the same approximation), one would polarize language toward the noun (the concept, *Bedeutung*) with this enigma (which is clearly the Husserlian enigma), namely, that here the noun can only have an objective reference insofar as something of the verb continues to play in it (which is in reality one of Heidegger’s premises in his meditation on Chapter VI of the Sixth *Logical Investigation*).² Whether it be about being *qua* being or existents *qua* existents (*eidos* or the state of things eidetic), the *qua* implies a tautology in which a *theme* is identified—one whose radical indissociability from language very much justifies its being designated as the *Said* of language by Levinas. The *Said* is the theme or content of the saying which looks to say something, and as such, it greatly exceeds the factual positivity of the objects or things signified by the signs. There is no existent which is nameless or more precisely, which is without a “logical” name. Equally, however, there is no being which is without a verb—it too, “logical” (AE 43-7; OB 34-7). In addition, to the extent that the *Said* reveals and states itself (in the manner of an *apophansis*) within the tautology, the *Said* is always ahead of and behind itself. If it is said, this is because it is always already there in the protentional product of itself, and if it recognizes or thinks about itself as the *Said* which focuses on itself, it is because it is still there with the memory of its project in retentions. What is characteristic of the *Said* is that it places itself in the stasis or ec-stasis of its being which is at the same

time the stasis or ec-stasis of its time, which is presence. Essence is not only that of the self-stability of that which keeps itself together in the stasis, but it is also the essence of that which only holds itself together to make, in some way, its own time. It is this self-governing reflexivity of the stasis which has been taken in modern metaphysics as a reflexivity of an *anonymous* ‘subjectivity’: the movement of the particular to the universal according to Hegel, the movement of the constituted towards the constituting according to Husserl, or the movement of the ontic towards the ontological according to the early Heidegger. And one knows, at least in terms of the first and the third, that this movement is co-extensive with the *death* of the singular subject in his or her wretched depths, towards authentic *ipse*. This is the ipseity of Hegel’s Absolute Spirit and the resolute ipseity towards nothingness and freedom of Heidegger at the end of what is each time, quite enigmatically, the quasi-magical conversion of the death of singularity in the resurrection of either the universal or individuated self as *solus ipse* in the folds and manifolds of the three ecstasies of time. One of the strong parts of Levinas’s thought is his having so clearly seen this effacing of singularity in the tauto-logy of essence.

What remains is the enigma of Husserl, who, as we have indicated, obstinately held on to the science of the ego. What Levinas suggests to us, at least at a secondary level, is that this obstinacy is not simply grounded in a metaphysical blindness or in a naive dependence with regard to the “metaphysics of subjectivity”—as Heidegger (and following him, those more or less strict or orthodox Heideggerians) ceaselessly delighted in repeating. Rather this obstinacy led Husserl in the direction (metaphysical, it is true) of a transcendental science of the ego as the place of an ultimate and foundational temporalization, where the *ipse* effectively finds itself as *solus ipse* walled up in its “primordial sphere”—with the other having to constitute itself there a little like Eve from Adam’s rib. This is so because this obstinacy is founded, moreover, in the presentiment of the irreducibility of the subject—and of subjectivity—insofar as it is an opening to a meaning which is not itself reducible to essence. If, for example, one examines the basic elements of Husserl’s famous doctrine of perception by perspectives—to which he remained faithful to the end—and if by means of a sufficiently radical *epoché*, one relieves it of the encumbrances of its metaphysical limits (which it is true, encumber it still), one cannot but be struck by the irreducible distance found there between the logico-eidetic (*noematic*) identification of the perceived thing (which, in a manner of speaking, is immediate since I know most often which thing I perceive) and infinity. Or, rather, one is struck by the interminable character of silhouettes which themselves temporalize/spatialize there with-

out these temporalizations/spatializations ever managing to *equal* the idea or *eidos* (except by idealization which makes an “idea in the Kantian sense” of the adequate perception). This is the abyss of the time of the perception which never synchronizes itself perfectly with the stasis of ideality,³ and in virtue of which there is an irreducible *hiatus* between the passivity of sensibility—between the *hyle* of passive syntheses—and the activity of ideation. We would also add that there is such a hiatus between the *apeiron* of the phenomenality of the phenomenon (of the thing appearing in its movement of appearance) and that which is determined logico-eidetically. If it is fair to say, as Levinas does, that “intuition is already a sensibility becoming an *idea*” (AE 77; OB 61)—meaning that the features of the *Abschattungen* have already been penetrated, in the Husserlian analysis, by the intentional *morphe* which shapes them and aspires to intuitive fulfillment by other *Abschattungen* capable of fulfilling the attention or plan—then it is no less true that what holds open the abyss between the phenomenon and ideality is nothing other than the subject anchored in his or her passivity. The great force of the Levinasian reversal, which invites us to re-read Husserl in this spirit, is due to this paradox, namely, that he ‘situates’ subjectivity in passivity and not, as was classically the case, in activity. If the subject maintains him- or herself, it is by way of sensibility not intelligibility, and it is this sensibility or passivity which creates the subject’s irreducible singularity—the same thing which keeps him or her from forgetting or losing him- or herself in the tauto-logy of the theme or the Said. A reversal which causes one to think, as Levinas is aware, of Maine de Biran (AE 3; OB 3); though we know that it will be presented in a very different manner.

The abyss of which we are speaking effectively signifies, in Levinas’s terms, the irreducibility of the *Saying* (meaning something like that which gropingly searches for itself within the obscurity of sensibility) to the Said (which hypostasizes itself in the tautological stasis of the theme). For Levinas, the *Saying*, which is anchored in the primordial and passive sensibility of the subject, is that which, in a very coherent and significant manner, precisely makes of the time of perception a temporality which can never be captured and synchronized in the stasis of the theme—or of the *noema* in Husserlian terms. His insightful analysis of Husserl’s studies in *The Phenomenology of Internal Time Consciousness* (AE 39-43; OB 31-4), shows—throughout, and thus, in a manner of speaking, at the heart of his critique—that what Husserl cannot “recover” is precisely dia-chrony, that which causes the *passage* of time within the originary passivity of the impression (AE 43n.18; OB 188n.18), and that which is not itself thematizable, i.e., reducible to the Same. This is what leads him to speak of a passivity more passive than

any passivity which is capable of being represented and thematized in the couple which it forms with activity, or in the kind of “preparation” which it constitutes, in the phase of presence, for activity. This passivity in the abyss, which is co-extensive in some manner with a *hyle* irreducible to a hylomorphism of intentionality, is what Levinas calls the “immemorial,” or that which comes from a past more ancient than any presence (notably, AE 11-2, 48-9, 57; OB 9-10, 38-9, 43), a past which is prehistoric or in our terms, “transcendent.” If, however, Levinas never designates this past as “transcendental,” it is because, having never been present, being thus unthematizable to a past of ‘another time,’ being more ancient than any temporality or history, and escaping the stasis or phase of presence, it gives witness to that irreducible passivity of the subject which makes it into a “creature.” It is here, as well, that the ethical relation—that meeting without a particular place in the present between the other and God (illeity, infinity)—is concretely grounded. This past cannot be “transcendental,” according to Levinas, to the extent that such qualification would lead it back to phenomenality and thus to the stasis of the Same.

Here we come across a very delicate point of interpretation in which the very status of phenomenology itself is in question and where we must make clear our divergence from Levinas. We are in perfect agreement with the idea that the Said and the Saying are incommensurable and that the Saying is irreducible to the Said, i.e., to the tauto-logy of the Same. We are also in agreement with the idea that phenomenology, at least in the case of its two greatest proponents, Husserl and Heidegger, is tautological and thus tends to reduce the Saying to the Said. It is the same for the co-existence, which is truly irreducible, of the tauto-logy of the phenomenon and of the *apophanticity* of the *logos* in Husserl and Heidegger. What is in question is simply whether or not the irreducible passivity of sensibility can itself be conceived as something which is an *integral* part of phenomenality itself, though this would depend upon a profound transformation of the conception of phenomenality. In other words, we must determine whether it really isn’t the case that the phenomenality of phenomena resides in their non-tauto-logy, in their incommensurability with themselves, in that which we call their fundamental instability or original distortion, and in virtue of which the Saying (in the very phase of presence) is *always* more than, or out of synch with, the Said and the phenomenon is always more than, or out of synch with, the theme or *noema*. And this is equally the case in relation to the *eidos*—or the state of things eidetic—as it is to essence; though, as we have suggested, one must then abandon faith in the *apophantic* character of the phenomenological ‘*logos*.’ In this way, contrary to what Husserl and Heidegger explicitly

thought, the tautology would not come from the phenomenality of phenomena, but, rather, and we side with Levinas here, from essence, where essence refers to a certain *symbolic institution* of language and thought which is that of philosophy or indeed of metaphysics. From phenomenality to tautology—which is always thereby *symbolic*—there would be an irreducible *hiatus* and the unabsorbable passivity of the subject. This passivity would not be only that determined by the subject's being pledged to and for the other in the ethical realm, but it would also be what we are calling the *phenomenological unconscious*, in which phenomenality overflows or keeps to the hither side of all intentionality and teleology. If phenomenality does this, it is necessarily in an immemorial past which has never been present, but which we can call “transcendental.” This present also communicates (and what is more, with no resolution into continuity) with a future that is equally transcendental, that will never be present, and where the *immemorial* at the same time reveals itself as irreducibly *immature*. ‘Immature’ because it never had the time to mature in time. If, thereby, the temporalization in presence is always at the same time the temporalization of a Saying which is irreducible in its excess or absence to the Said—in the instability of any Said in relation to the Saying—this is so because the temporalization never manages (because of this instability) to thematize the proto-temporalization of the immemorial/immature, and because this tautological thematization is always *premature*, and always without origin by the very fact of its being premature. This is what constitutes the whole enigma—underivable and irreducible—of symbolic institution (which is, in general, that of the symbolic tautology of signs). Significations (*Bedeutungen, eide*) are, in this regard, the more or less arbitrary features of sense (*Sinn*) which—from time immemorial—are called to remain in their immaturity for the eternity of presence. The non-tautology of the phenomenon is what brings to thought, or rather to thinking and history, this untamed and unstable mobility which prevents humanity from becoming set in systems—at least if one uses a long enough time line.

Our suggestion is not the completely sterile one which simply juxtaposes two opposing systems of ideas. This critical distance appears necessary to us not only to more clearly establish the ‘site’ whence we speak, but again and in the same movement to judge more honestly our reading of Levinas. It is in relation to this other possibility of phenomenology, which is no doubt more faithful to the inspiration of Husserl than Heidegger, that we shall endeavor to understand the core of Levinas’s thought; namely, his extraordinary expansion of the ethical dimension. There is indeed, in our mind, no incompatibility between Levinas’s interpretation of that passivity more passive than all passiv-

ity and ours, where this passivity is also an integral part of phenomenality (a phenomenality, however, which is non-tautological in being some distance from essence). If there were, then we would stop right here. Simply put, the other path (which we have just outlined towards an “otherwise than essence” and towards a modification of ontology in the direction of a proto-ontology⁴) allows us, we think, to see the Levinasian foundation of humanity (in relation to which our ‘extension’ of phenomenology only appears to have radically distanced us) as the *crucial* place of that which we call the symbolic *instituting*, as opposed to the symbolic institution. This is a ‘site’ without effective place and, indeed, from which the first place is equally incapable of being derived or deduced (short of by a dogmatic ‘metaphysics’), and where, apart from phenomenology even as it is recently understood, we have to put the human to the test—though maybe, as we shall see, without ethics being envisioned for all that as a sort of “foundational complement” of phenomenology.

Diachrony and Infinity

To the extent that diachrony is grounded in a past that is immemorial, pre-original, unthematizable, and irreducible to the Same of tautology, it does not have, according to Levinas, an origin or *arche*. Incommensurable with presence, not syn-chronizable, it is, in relation to the stasis of essence, the trace of an infinity which is radically Other; in other words, it is also *anarchic*. It is an anarchy which is primordial, immemorial, pre-originary, and which neither commands nor orders anything *within being*.⁵ Nor does it determine anything in the order of that which appears. This anarchy is a kind of ‘wildness’ which is pre-ontological and unable to be recuperated in the theme or the Said and which is, paradoxically, the clue to that mystery wherein the ethical, as the human bond, is tied together.

We just used the expression “a kind of wildness,” though it seems non-sensical, because this ethical knot is in no way ‘natural.’ This is what is so paradoxical, and thus also what is so profound in Levinas’s thought. This complex movement is outlined in the initial sketch at the beginning of *Otherwise than Being*.

But in the responsibility for another . . . the negativity of this anarchy, this refusal of the present, of appearing, of the immemorial, *commands me* and *ordains me* to the other, to the first one on the scene, and makes me approach him, makes me his neighbor. It thus diverges from nothingness as well as from being. It provokes this responsibility *against my will*, that is, by *substituting me* for the other *as a hostage*. All my inwardness is invested in the form of

a despite-me, for-another. Despite-me, for-another, is signification par excellence. And it is *the sense of the “oneself,”* that accusative that derives from no nominative; it is the very fact of finding one-self while losing oneself (AE 14; OB 11, emphasis added).

By this “ordination” to the face of the other, the negative attributes of what is beyond essence “become positive in responsibility” (AE 14; OB 11). The non-presence of the infinite is thus not a figure of negative theology, but rather shows itself in a positive fashion in the responsibility of a response which responds to a non-thematizable provocation, i.e., to a “trauma” which is pre-original and thus that of a “debt which has been acquired before any freedom, before any consciousness, before any present.” The paradox is that this debt “increases in the measure that it is paid” in the gap which hollows itself into an abyss: a gap which makes itself infinite and whence bursts forth the “glory of the infinite” in which positivity is converted into responsibility (for all of this, see AE 14; OB 11-2).⁶ It is in the Illeity of the infinite (of God), where the *il* (it) and *ille* (this one)⁷ play and in which “the coming toward me is a departure which lets me accomplish a movement toward a neighbor” (AE 15; OB 13). In this sense, the “problem of transcendence and of God and the problem of subjectivity irreducible to essence, irreducible to essential immanence, go together” (AE 20; OB 17). Such is the movement of a thinking as subtle as it is complex, into which we must enter because it is the very core of Levinas’s thought. It is his original contribution to the question of humanity and ipseity, and it represents a radical rupture as much from Hegel as from Heidegger. It is such a great rupture that it can be read as the most robust antidote to the nihilism of the “being-towards-death” of *Being and Time*.⁸ As we shall see, this does not mean that the cure will be any less disquieting than the disease—quite the opposite!

If we take up the matter from the beginning in its relation to ‘classical’ phenomenology as found in Husserl and Heidegger (where ‘classical philosophy’ refers to that which separates itself—insofar as it is a tauto-logy—from the phenomenon as the Same), then the opening to the ethical dimension, to its interruption of the phenomenological tautology, operates in a ‘reduction’ which, inspired by Husserl, radicalizes the conception of this reduction in an incessant critique of the Said by the Saying, or in the pursuit of the excess or failure of the Said *vis-à-vis* the Saying. It is a question of “going back” once again beyond or to the hither side of the Said, “to show the signification proper to the *Saying* on the hither side of the thematization of the Said” (AE 55; OB 43), or to allow the diachronic to flicker in the impossibility of its synchronization in the stasis of time and essence, in its indescribability (AE 69; OB 53) “beyond the simple correlation which is set up between the Saying

and the Said.”⁹ As we have seen, this first of all opens out to the abyss of a sensibility and of a passivity which is not always already hylomorphic, but it also—given the ‘restrained’ or ‘classic’ interpretation of phenomenology—opens to the entrance of the Saying as something always already, in the non-ontological immemoriality of anarchy, an “ethical” Saying. Or a Saying of *oneself* [*se Dire*], an exposing of oneself in nakedness to the other, a giving of oneself in sincerity’s absence of reserve which delivers the self to the other as an accusative. One here stands accused before any due process, and thus before any justice or involvement in what is appropriately called the structure of language or *logos*. The Saying, according to Levinas, is indissociably a saying oneself [*se dire*] in a sense which—though signifying anarchy—has no signified, which would directly change the immemorial anarchy into the memory of an *archê* or into the stasis of essence, i.e., into an *Ereignis*. This signification of the Saying is not thereby the principle or origin of all the others. It is a giving which is not that anonymous one of the “*Es gibt*” and in relation to which signs would make themselves signs of meaning, but, rather, it is a gift which is pure, anarchic, immemorial; a pure gift to another of an ‘I’ which thereby becomes the ‘oneself’ of the ‘saying oneself,’ and thus the hostage to the other. It is only by virtue of this gift, namely, to live in this pre-original space or abyss, that language can mean something *other* than itself or something outside the tautology of essence or *Ereignis*. This apparently irreparable hemorrhaging of meaning or signification will be balanced by the abrupt appearance of the third party within the primordial relation of self/other and the pronouncement of justice. It is this radical exhibition of the self, in any case, which will bring about the primordial drawing out of the subject from the *solus ipse* of its enjoyment, from this sort of happy and Edenic innocence of its completely self-involved life. But this exposition, thereby, is unaware of itself as such to the extent that in not stating itself in the saying of *self* [*ne se disant pas dans le ‘se’ dire*] it is deprived of itself, of its ‘accusative.’ As a result, this innocence is not really, strictly speaking, solipsistic since it does not have an *ipse*.

The entire nature of this so-called symbolic instituting of humanity is taken up in a very coherent manner in Levinas’s work with the question of the self, i.e., with *Selbstheit* or ipseity. He shares this starting point with Hegel and Heidegger (in *Being and Time*) and equally with Husserl. Indeed, Levinas pushes it as an investigation into a self that is not yet the self-identified self in the guise of a stasis in the consciousness of self. For it is because Hegel confused the absolute or unconditional *singularity* of this self—which cannot be discovered in a theme or in representation, and which is immemorial in the absolute or uncondi-

tioned sensibility or passivity that makes it a creature (AE 133; OB 105)—with the particular self of representation, that Hegel was able to reabsorb this singularity without residue, in the universal and presumably absolute self of absolute spirit, and thus in the divine singularity that is absolute to the extent of its universality and which, as if in its own cloud, dissipates sensibility within the ideality of the absolute Idea. There is recurrence, in fact, one might even say infinite recurrence, of the self (regression to the infinite) to the extent that this self, incapable of being located in the stasis or phase of presence, is anchored in the immemorial passivity outside of presence (of all presence) as One which is beyond being (AE 135; OB 106). This is a self without a name which only bears its name as an “assumed name, pseudonym, or *pro-noun* [*pro-nom*],” the ‘I’ of him who says and who, in this saying, says “himself” [“*se*” *dit*]. A self which, so to speak, comes from further away than presence and for which “self-presence” is always already a betrayal. A self in infinite flight, itself, precisely, by the ethical order which *appoints* the self in its irreplaceable unicity (AE 133n.9; OB 105n.9), and in an irreducible singularity that is specifically “prior to the distinction between the particular and the universal” (AE 137; OB 108). Already one can see clearly the distance from Heidegger, since it is within this unremissible recurrence of the self [*soi*] into the itself [*soi-même*] that is born “the anguish of this *in-itself* of the oneself. This anguish is not the existential ‘being for death’, but the constriction of an ‘entry into the inside’ or the ‘hither side’ of all extension . . . the anxiety of contraction and breakup” (AE 137; OB 108). And it is this recurrence of the contraction in a “withdrawal into oneself which is an exile in oneself” (AE 135; OB 107) which is “the self” (AE 138; OB 108). Levinas puts this recurrence explicitly in relation (AE 138; OB 108) to the “instant” in the third hypothesis of Plato’s *Parmenides* (156c-d) as a counter-point or inter-val of diachrony. Levinas, thus, speaks of a “reclusion of the Ego into itself, outside of order,” and of a “subterranean digging” (AE 138n.11; OB 195n.11) “within the fullness of the punctual, with the inextendedness of the one” (AE 139; OB 109).

Were the recurrence of ipseity not incarnation itself (AE 139; OB 109), which ties itself to the “irrecusable exigency of the other” (AE 139; OB 109), then one could call this incessant chasing after the self a desperate or vain pursuit. This is what pushes the self to the nakedness of exhibition and to saying itself. This search—which we all know insofar as we would not busy ourselves in the false innocence of worldly diversions—only becomes engaged by way of responsibility, itself “anterior to all free commitment” (AE 139; OB 109). This is a responsibility wherein a sort of debt is marked which should not be confused simply with

guilt, and which is tied to the immemorial passivity of sensibility and death (AE 139; OB 109). It is difficult to imagine this debt because it does not lead, according to Levinas, to servitude or slavery, even though it is pre-archaic, that is pre-originary.

Recurrence is still only the preliminary to an astonishing reversal which is perhaps even more abyssal than what preceded it, namely, that which he names “substitution.” One must think recurrence, in some fashion, to the very end where “the expulsion of the self from itself” of recurrence “is its substitution for the other” (AE 141; OB 111). In the first place, recurrence is “persecution.” If, in the search for my “self,” I am pushed back to my ultimate defenses [*jusque dans mes derniers retranchements*] which, moreover, do not really exist; if, in this movement, there is “an indebtedness *before any loan*, not assumed (viz., non-free), anarchical . . . like an echo of a sound that would precede the resonance of this sound” (AE 141; OB 111); if I am thus subject to this irreducible “passivity of a trauma” (AE 141; OB 111), then this “passivity deserves the epithet of ‘complete’ or ‘absolute’ only if the persecuted one is liable to answer for the persecutor” (AE 141; OB 111). It is no longer a question of “undergoing *by* the other,” but of “undergoing *for* the other” (AE 141; OB 111), and this is a “passing from the outrage undergone,” from the other in “persecution,” to the “responsibility for the persecutor, and, in this sense, from suffering to expiation for the other” (AE 141; OB 111). If I find *myself*, it is as a “hostage” to the other in the incarnate passivity of an identity without concept, which individuates itself as unique only “in the impossibility of evading the assignation of the other without blame” (AE 142; OB 112). This sense of being a hostage is not grounded in some altruistic will, benevolence, or love (AE 142; OB 112), but in the non-condition of my passivity which makes me substitute myself for the other or, in other words, which makes me carry the weight—which no other than I can take—of the other. This is a responsibility which I cannot escape and where, at the same time that I carry the weight of the other, I am called to be the bearer of the weight of the world (AE 139n. 12; OB 195n. 12). We shall see that this is a fundamentally asymmetrical relation which escapes all calculation and projects because it proceeds from “the anachronism of a debt preceding the loan” where I am indebted to myself only because I am indebted, before all betwixt, to the other. “I am ‘in-myself through the others’” (AE 143; OB 112), and the worst of it is that the more that I discover myself responsible, the more that I am just, the more indebted I am (AE 143; OB 112). This is the abyss where “nothing is more burdensome than a neighbor” (AE 111; OB 88), and, we might add, nothing is more *frightening*. It must be underscored that this is frightening because of the paradox that it is “in me alone [that] inno-

cence can be accused without absurdity” and that “to accuse the innocence of the other, to ask of the other more than he owes is criminal” (AE 144n.18; OB 195n.18). This is so because the “infinite passion of responsibility, in its return upon itself *goes further* than its identity . . . and puts the being in itself in deficit” (AE 144; OB 113, Richir’s emphasis). The self cannot be found in that which would be the ultimate scion of the activity in passivity, namely, in a “taking hold of oneself,” which would stop the recurrence and the persecution to the degree (which is consequently contradictory because synchronic) of the self’s reversal in substitution. Here there is only an infinite *lack of proportion*.

What is perhaps most frightening in the infinite movement of recurrence/persecution is the violence through which the creature tries to make itself into a creator, i.e., God himself—He who perhaps carries the ultimate weight of the other and of the world. The ipseity “in the passivity without the *arche* characteristic of identity, is a hostage,” and “the word ‘I’ means *here I am*, answering for everything and for everyone” (AE 145; OB 114). The hither side of the self *within* the recurrence to the self is probably already, *qua* immemorial anarchy, the infinite which calls and in-spires the infinite flight of the self. This means, interpreting deliberately here, that “substitution” is a difficult, subtle, and ambiguous term.

Indeed, it has “an other side”:

In this substitution, in which identity is inverted . . . the self is absolved of itself. Is this freedom? It is a different freedom from that of 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 . . . is an openness (AE 145; OB 115).

This is a veritable *passing through the death* of the self as re-presented or identified by the concept or *eidos*, but which has nothing of the Hegelian “transfiguration” since this “self without a concept, unequal in identity, signifies itself in the first person, setting forth the plane of Saying, pro-ducing itself in the Saying as an *ego* or as *me*, that is, utterly different from any other ego, that is, having a meaning *despite death*. Contrary to the ontology of death, this self opens an order in which death can be not recognized,” and is that of an “identity in *diastasis*” (AE 145; OB 115, emphasis added).

What does this mean? It means that “I find myself cast back to the hither side of my point of departure” (AE 145; OB 115), that the “self is out of phase with itself, forgetful of itself, forgetful in biting in upon itself, in the reference to itself which is the *gnawing away at oneself of remorse*” (AE 145; OB 115), and that “to be in-oneself, *backed up against oneself*, to the extent of substituting oneself for all that pushes one into this null-place, is for the I to be in-itself, lying in-itself beyond essence. The reclusion of the ego in itself, on the hither side of this identity, in the other, the expiation supporting the weight of the non-ego, is neither a triumph nor a failure” (AE 148; OB 116), because this would presume “a freedom and the imperialism of a political or ecclesiastical ego” (AE 148; OB 116). Substitution is thus a movement which is more complex than it would appear, because in the very movement where substitution pushes the self into the unbearable and frightening midst of the persecutorial obsession of the other, at the very moment where the self appears as a radical hostage in a kind of assigning (and accusing without any motive) by the other which denies the self any innocence or possibility of escaping or evading; the characteristic of the for-itself—which only appears overwhelming (and deadly, we might add) by persisting “egotistically” in itself—*reverses itself* into responsibility *for* others. This is true not so much because from now on I alone must carry the weight of others and the world, but because in falling on the hither side of the self, in the diastasis of the self which opens itself as diachrony, I open myself in a distance or separation (that of anarchy) where the response—which is without any previous obligations of responsibility—is “human fraternity” (AE 148; OB 116). It is here that the face of the other, rather than being that of the frightening and pitiless persecutor, is the “unrepresentable trace, the way of the Infinite” (AE 148; OB 116), “the trace of the Infinite” which is “the trace of a departure” (AE 149; OB 117). Now this departure, being always already underway, and thus never having begun, is without *arche*, and inscribes itself in the immemorial anarchy of the primordial. The illeity of the Infinite bursts or surges forth 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” (AE 148n.19; OB 196n.19). In other words, the abyss hollowed out in the diastasis of identity (of the self) at the heart of substitution is only the frightening abyss of what persecutes me in my very self so long as the self contracts upon itself and refuses the infinite movement—a refusal which generates the infinite debt—of the responsibility which nonetheless gnaws at it. Substitution in this sense is the radical *abandonment* of self to passivity. In this passivity, it is not the other *qua* other self that besets and persecutes me, but really the trace of the retreat of the infinite that

draws me in, as in a gigantic call of the infinite. Now, because it is anarchic, this substitution is not convertible into a sovereignty wherein “the self absolves itself of itself,” and where “the other is supported (in its limit) by *that which it limits*” (AE 145; OB 115). In other words, that which is beyond the ego of my-*self* is the Infinite. The terror before the other, where the self walls itself up in itself, is converted into the terror before God, as He whose retreat addresses the other to my responsibility. I am thus no longer in the grip of the blasphemous, though terrifying, dream of substituting myself for God, but, “undone to the limit in my identity” (AE 149n.20; OB 196n.20), I am responsible for the other in the infinitizing retreat of the infinite. What lies in the unfathomable depths of recurrence and persecution is not the death of the self in its character as untraceable, but—on the level of its infinity—the responsibility for the other inasmuch as the other carries in his or her face the immemorial trace of God. In substituting myself for others, even though I am irreplaceable in my uniqueness that is beyond essence, I do not take the ultimate defense of an ego who thereby “washes his or her hands” of the entire affair; but, quite to the contrary, I bear (and suffer) the others’ weight insofar as it is nothing other than the “inspiration”—in the most concrete sense of the word in relative to ‘respiration’—of air. In this case, the call for air is initiated by the illeity of the Infinite. God ‘is not’; he is neither in me nor in the other (this is the Hegelian or Feuerbachian illusion), because he simply ‘is’ not; He is always already and always still elsewhere in the immemorial trace of His retreat. Consequently, my suffering of the other and the suffering of incarnation (illness, aging, the innumerable wrinkles left by daily wounds) are a “suffering ‘for God’ who suffers from my suffering,” this being the “‘anarchic’ trace of God in passivity” (AE 150n.21; OB 196n.21). Nor is it the case that in this substitution I give myself over to God as to one who would absolve me of my responsibility to the other, since this would come back to dividing myself so that I might substitute a part of myself for God; rather, the “without cause” and “without reason” of my suffering is only the trace of an unimaginable—because infinite—suffering. The absolution of the relation in substitution signifies the diastasis or putting out of phase of the identity (of the self) in its creaturely condition. The infinite debt due the other only appears as such to one looking to substitute himself for God. It is rather the case that what changes or is converted here in substitution is the shift in emphasis from the debt to the infinite, or the fact that original expiation is converted into the “expiation for being” (AE 151; OB 118). This is a true “expiration” which is not necessarily that of a last breath since it is followed by the “inspiration” of the infinitizing movement of the infinite in its retreat in the movement from the face of

the other. If I am another in substitution, the other (*autre*) is the trace of the Other (*Autre*). It is in the face of the other, *qua* trace, that I myself take on a face, *qua* trace; something which I would never be able to do by my own means—since I only ‘find’ by such means the regress to the infinite and thus the “bad infinite” (Hegel) of recurrence. It is this community of the trace (which must be considered outside of its conceptual and eidetic identity) which is the declaration of fraternity in the asymmetry which is always at work within responsibility.

This is also the “religious situation of transcendence” (AE 155n.25; OB 197n.25)—Levinas very significantly names it “the religiosity of the self” (AE 150; OB 118)—which few other philosophers have emphasized with such rigor. Yet because this is so, theological language can only here be unfaithful to such rigorous philosophical analysis since the “Infinite ‘presents itself’ an-archically” (AE 155n.25; OB 197n.25) and since the language concerning God “can never be taken literally” (AE 155n.25; OB 197n.25). Certainly this can only shock the philosopher, though it is not so much because all theology is, strictly speaking, impossible (since Levinas has magnificently shown us that this is in the end quite acceptable), but rather because one is here dealing with a “religious situation,” something which we find clearly set out in the sentence already cited and which we repeat while highlighting what we take to be most significant: “the illeity of Infinity in the face as the withdrawal . . . which *addresses* the other to my responsibility” (AE 148n.19; OB 196n.19, Richir’s emphasis). This leads us to say that, beyond the ethical, or rather by way of its radicality, there is already something religious. One can see this, for example, in Levinas’s insistence on the obsession with and by the other, and in the extent to which it is only through this obsession—and only insofar as this obsession is a persecution—that the reversal (‘conversion’ would here be too easy) of substitution, and the opening—within the already unsoundable depths of passivity—of the abyss of the infinite are both effected. Therefore, in our view, it is more at the level of Levinas’s thought than in what he actually writes, that we might discern traces of a language that was other than philosophical—but to do that would be privileging our interpretation too readily. In a word, in reading Levinas’s work (and contrary to what he says), one experiences all the meaning of the wisdom of the Greeks which was doubtlessly engrossed in the eternal, the immutable, contemplation, ataraxy, or autarchy only as an escape from the obsession with the human (though with a subtlety much greater than we think, and in a way that was not simply a ‘fleeing forward’ which is really quite ‘modern’ in character). There, perhaps, was sought a trial—no less paradoxical—of freedom; a ‘wild’ freedom of which one finds evidence, for example, in Plato’s *Parmenides* (where

the anarchy of the One is doubtlessly *also* of another sort than the anarchy considered by Levinas). And, although in the modern world this liberation from the obsession with the human may have been completely reversed and perverted into a morbid fascination with the inhuman—the operational and auto-nomous ‘rationality’—where the human effectively finds itself pulverized and splintered, this need not cut us off from all attempts to *rethink* the Greeks. The contrary is actually true; for at Levinas’s—undoubtedly negative—prompting, we are allowed to find ourselves in Greek thought once again (though in a different fashion) in the ‘dialogue’ between the religious and the philosophical which Levinas tied together without weakening as a philosopher.

From whence, or rather, how, can one say that it is the trace of the retreat of the infinite in the face which *orders* the Other to my responsibility? From whence or how does this “order” or “ordination” which orders and commands come? From the primordial, immemorial, and pre-originary anarchy? Certainly. The Levinasian proposal, we have seen, is quite remarkably coherent, devoid of any philosophical inconsistencies. His analysis of that passivity which is more ancient and more passive than all passivity is inescapable [*incontournable*] and consists of a powerful new perspective. But, as one will have understood, it is the ‘moment’ of reversal in the substitution that ‘troubles’ us and which requires us to make a closer analysis, though not in order to contest it—since we are here beyond that which might be contested or not—but rather to catch hold in our analysis, in its living state as it were, of the possibility of another interpretation in order to get a new discussion going. It is certainly true that beyond some approximate and easy determination of the terms of the debate, Levinas has given us a powerful and extraordinary reflection on the question of ipseity, a question which is most often neglected in philosophy. A powerful reflection which distances us from Heidegger and thereby allows us to see the partial or unilateral character of his thought: the impossibility of escaping responsibility is the impossibility of escaping the other and thus the impossibility of escaping God, and this impossibility

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.¹⁰ 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 (AE 165; OB 128).

It is not a question here of ‘defending’ Heidegger, whose thinking on ipseity does not—at its best—go beyond the recurrence of the self in the existential solipsism (a far more radical solipsism, despite its appearance, than Husserl’s transcendental solipsism). It is rather a question

of examining, first of all, what might be the meaning of this submission to “sacrifice” which we already know “gives a meaning to death,” and second, the fact that the “absolute singularity of the responsible one encompasses the generality or generalization of death” and that here “death can no longer introduce the absurd” (AE 165-66; OB 129). And, finally, we must also return to the important acknowledgment by Levinas of Kant’s work (AE 165-66; OB 129).

Infinity and Phenomenon: The Sublime in Levinas

By way of substitution,

[Passivity] is beyond even passivity. To be oneself as in the trace of one's exile is to be as a pure withdrawal from oneself, and as such, an inwardness . . . without secrets is a pure witness to the inordinateness which already commands me to give to the other, taking the bread out of my own mouth and making a gift of my own skin (AE 176; OB 138).

This wonderful manner of speaking is related by Levinas to an equally wonderful passage from Simone Weil: “Father take from me this body and this soul and make them into your things, and let there subsist of me eternally only this taking itself” (AE 176n.3; OB 198n.3). Responsibility is “an unquestioning response” which gives to me an “I, unique in my genus” (AE 176; OB 139). “In the absolute assignation of the subject, the Infinite is enigmatically heard: before and beyond” (AE 178; OB 140). It is there that the Saying is a saying of oneself [*se dire*] and a gift of pure meaningfulness to the other in the “scandal of sincerity” (AE 182; OB 143). This is a “statement of the ‘here I am’ which is identified with nothing but the very voice that states and delivers itself, the voice that signifies” (AE 182; OB 143). The sincerity of the testimony is consequently “Saying without the Said,” and in the “pure transparency of the admission” the Saying testifies already to the Infinite and reflects its “glory” (AE 182; OB 143). Here, the reversal of substitution is understood better: *“Glory is but the other face of the passivity of the subject.* Substituting itself for the other . . . responsibility for the neighbor, inspired by the other, I, the same, am torn up from my beginning in myself, my equality with myself” (AE 184; OB 144, Richir’s emphasis). Or again: “The glory of the Infinite is the anarchic identity of the subject flushed out without being able to slip away. It is the ego led to sincerity, making signs to the other” (AE 184; OB 144). It is thus, “the pure obedience to glory that commands,” the “saying without *noematic* [or thematic] correlation” (AE 184; OB 145). Substitution “is a non-equality with oneself, a non-recovering of self by self, a dispossession of self, the self leaving the clandestinity of its identification. It

is already a sign made to another" (AE 184-85; OB 145). This is what Levinas above called the diastasis of the identity of the self, whereby, "the Infinite does not appear to him that bears witness to it. On the contrary the witness belongs to the glory of the Infinite" (AE 186; OB 146). This divestment of the self in giving testimony, which also, however, causes one to say "here I am" in the saying of oneself, is what brings about the "one absolved of all relationship . . . without a situation, without a dwelling place, expelled from everywhere and from itself" (AE 186; OB 146). It is a self without place, utopic, beyond all retrenchment. It is thereby "the glory" which "commands me from my own mouth," and it is the Infinite which "concerns me and circumscribes me and orders me by my own voice" (AE 187; OB 147). It is this very thing that gave me the brief illusion of power and desire to substitute or take "myself" "for God." This inspiration "by the Infinite, which, as *illeity*, does not appear, is not present, has always already past" (AE 188; OB 148). It is a matter of substituting "myself" for the other both by way of the commandment which thrusts me out of *my-self* and in the movement whereby the other directs him- or herself to me. It is the diachrony which is said in the diastasis of this self, where the self is the irreducible instability of the one without a concept. "The order finds itself anachronically in the obedience itself," (AE 188; OB 148) as "a trauma [which] has surprised me completely" (AE 188; OB 148). This is the way in which one must understand Levinas's expression, "the inscription of the law in consciousness," that is, in the ambiguity of autonomy and heteronomy (AE 188; OB 148).

It is in prophetism that "this reverting, in which the perception of the order coincides with the signification of this order by him who obeys it (AE 190; OB 149). Thus it is here too that the reverting to the work in substitution ultimately gains, according to us, its 'quintessence' or its 'truth'. It is there (AE 190-4; OB 149-52) that we can better examine the meaning of "religiosity" which lies at the heart of ethics. We must study these paradoxical and difficult pages very closely because they contain for us the heart of *Otherwise than Being*. It is from this source that I may *know* that the trace of the retreat of the infinite is that which *orders* the Other to my responsibility; a "knowing" which obviously is not of the order of philosophical knowledge which is itself tautological. For the testimony of the Infinite obviously is not thematic, it has no content, or, rather, its only content is the Saying, without the Said, of sincerity, the "here I am," which is directly present in the accusative. And hence this sentence: "The word God is still absent from the phrase in which God is for the first time involved with words" (AE 190; OB 149). "To bear witness [to] God is precisely not to state this extraordinary word" (AE 190; OB 149). The "here I am" signifies me in

the name of God, at the service of men that look at me, without having anything with which to identify me, but the sound of my voice or the figure of my gesture—the saying itself” (AE 190; OB 149). Recurrence is the “extradition” of the self to the neighbor (AE 190; OB 149), it is where the diastasis of the identity of the self is produced, i.e., the reversal of substitution.

But what is proper to all the relations that are thus unfolded . . . is the fact that the return is sketched out in the going, the appeal is understood in the response, the ‘provocation’ coming from God is in my invocation. . . . The transcendence of the revelation lies in the fact that the ‘epiphany’ comes in the saying of him that received it. The order that orders me does not leave me any possibility of setting things right side up again with impunity, of going back from the exteriority of the Infinite, as when before a theme one goes back from the signifier to the signified, or as when in a dialogue one finds in ‘you’ a being. It is in prophecy that the Infinite escapes the objectification of thematization and of dialogue, and signifies as *illeity*, in the third person” (AE 190-1; OB 149-50).

Or in other words:

The Infinite orders to me the neighbor as a face without being exposed to me, and does so the more imperiously that proximity narrows. The order has not been the *cause* of my response . . . I find the order in my response itself, which . . . as a ‘here I am’, brings me out of invisibility, out of the shadow in which my responsibility could have been evaded. This saying belongs to the very glory of which it bears witness. This way for the order to come from I know not where, this *coming* that is not a *recalling* . . . this non-phenomenality of the order . . . we have called *illeity* . . . the advent of the order to which I am subjected before hearing it [*avant de l'entendre*] or that I hear in my own Saying. This is an *august* command, but one that does not constrain or dominate and leaves me outside of any correlation with its source (AE 191; OB 150).

We must strive to understand this. Prophesying is not a response to a call which would be pre-understood [*se pré-entendrait*] (in a project not yet articulated), something like the voice of God. It is not a sort of *apophansis* which is transposed from a *logos* which would come from elsewhere, and which would need to be translated into the human voice. The prophet does not aim to say what he would already have heard of the divine order and voice. His words are not, in this sense, the expression of the divine ‘will’ which more or less hit the mark or which are more or less faithful; or rather, to think of these things in this manner, as philosophy does, changes nothing since that which would have been understood as words would already be a *human* testimony of the infinite itself already inscribed in the temporal phase of the meaning—itself proceeding from ‘inspiration.’ The prophet does not

hear transcendent or transcendental voices that he then uses his ingenuity, by order of his election thereby imaginary and pathological, to express to impoverished others who would not have heard them.¹¹ On the contrary, the prophet speaks, says, and states himself, *without already having heard*, outside of memory and reminiscence. Nothing precedes the response which is his call, in this paradox of a response without a question, or, rather, of a response of which the “originary” character of being out of phase only elicits, so to speak, the question *after the fact*. It is well known that most of the time it is characteristic of prophets not to be ‘followed’. It is this which brings it about that the Infinite ‘is’ there as both the unthematizable reverse side of that which, despite everything, is found in the response and as the exteriority or illeity that, so to speak, brings about the *epoché* of all that is signified in the pure signification which is empty from the point of view of essence or the signified. This comes to be without the Infinite or God appearing in the response or intimated order, because this would clearly suppose that the prophet already had heard before speaking. The desire to turn this reverse side right side out again is precisely the desire to pass from the terrifying prophetic saying to the violence, even more terrifying, of the desire to substitute oneself for God; i.e., to betray anarchy, making it into an *arche* of what would thereby be an authority or power generating servitude. The status of the prophetic utterance is of an entirely exceptional variety. This is so because, rather than being a return to the voice already heard which would permit the syn-chronization of the going forth with the return itself, prophetic utterance is a primordial going forth. A going forth which holds nothing back, opened in the diastasis or out of phase character of the identity of the self, and which, by its pre-originary advance in relation to the return, always already comes before it, allowing this return to get started only late. This is not so that one can be more precise in the language or sense of order that is heard here, nor so as to refine the utterance or sharpen its theme, but precisely to show forth the glory of the Infinite, as the call which is prior to any return and which arrives as a call that appears pre-originary, as the infinitizing of the infinite, as irreducibly *excessive* to the return, and beyond any transcendental retrojection of the return in the going forth. This kind of absolute and free generosity of the gift of saying which orders from the beyond of time and essence—from the primordial and immemorial anarchy—creates, according to Levinas’s phrasing of the problem, the *non-phenomenality* of the gift, i.e., its irreducible precession over any transcendental *a priori*. It is because it is without *arche*, beginning, foundation, or origin that the commandment neither constrains nor dominates. Or rather, it is in its irreducible *precedence* or *precession* that the order, which the command

intimates to me, to say myself and deliver myself to the other does not give *itself* title to anything and does not give *me* title to anything, because it is neither reflected nor reflective. No more does it, in this precession, involve me in a reflection which would retroject the *a posteriori* of the response into the *a priori* of the call. This saying is the absolute gift to the other in the diastasis of the substitution only because it is primarily unreflective, and anchored, of course, in radical passivity and thus, in addition, irreducible to an absolute spontaneity (that of the call) which, as not my own, could only be that of God Himself. The prophet, as we have indicated, is not the megaphone of God; even less is he or she His representative or lieutenant. He or she is only in some way inspired by God insofar as it belongs to his or her condition as a creature to breathe and insofar as this inspiration is irreducibly, diachronically out-of-phase [*en déphasage*] with expiration—with the passage from responsibility to the ultimate that is substitution. The fact that the source may be signified by humans in the return does not mean that humans may ‘accompany’ it in its hemorrhaging, except in the after shock of the recurrence and persecution which is always already diachronically (or anachronically) set off or out-of-phase in relation to the immemorial anarchy. As Levinas writes, with an extraordinary depth of insight, it is in this sense that the name of God is in every way unique in its genus—and thus other than the name through which an existent ‘is’ at least as much as it ‘is’ through Being: “the name outside essence or beyond essence, *the individual prior to individuality*, is named God. It precedes all divinity, that is, the divine essence to which the false gods, like individuals sheltered within their concept, lay claim” (AE 68n.38; OB 190n.38, Richir’s emphasis).

We hereby take up once more the thread of “the intrigue of ethics” which is indeed the question or enigma of a self-identity without concepts, and this with a great deal of subtlety. To think to find *oneself* is to identify oneself (blasphemously) with God. This is so because the self—far from vanishing in the infinite flight of recurrence or becoming “frozen” in authenticity or the resolute propriety of Heidegger’s existential solipsism, which is a “mineness” that cannot be reduced to death—only “finds itself anew,” as commanded to the face of the other in the diastasis or the being out-of-phase of the “oneself” [sel] of the “saying oneself” [se dire]. It is here that the exodus out from the self in its return amplifies itself to Infinity, like a late echo creating its own sound from a going which has always already preceded it, which takes it unaware [*sur-prend*], and which, by this immemorial and anarchical “over”-taking, “takes” it as a creaturely passivity and as sensibility irreducible to ideality. In relation to the thematization of language, even as we understand it, namely as something which is forever unaccom-

plished and marked by what we have called the “immemorial/imma-ture,” this “coming upon unexpectedly” [*surprise*] constitutes in some sense the perfect example of Diachrony. But may one purify diachrony in this way? Does not speaking as forcefully about prophetism as Levinas does, suppose that the problem is resolved in the very movement where it is posed? To put it differently, does not the presupposition that prophetism is humanly possible and that it might even be the possibility of all *human* possibilities simply re-peat the problem in a circular and tautological manner? It all comes down to knowing whether or not this thinking is the only possible interpretation of what is here in question; or, in other words, to knowing whether there is not a circularity in the question that would itself proceed from what we call a *symbolic tautology*. This tautology would of course consist of a style different from what is at work in philosophy, but whose philosophical interest would lie precisely in the possibilities which this circularity would offer toward the understanding of its originality, insofar as it is a tautology symbolic of the religious ‘dimension’ of humanity. In relation to the enlargement and recasting of phenomenology that we are proposing, the ‘site’ of this symbolic tautology would be that of what we call the *symbolic instituting*, which is anarchic inasmuch as, contrary to the God of onto-theology, by itself it institutes nothing of the order of being, but is only the bearer of the question or the enigma of the identity without concept (*ipseity*)—namely, human identity. Moreover, this distance in relation to what arises out of the instituted symbolic order (of which, in our opinion, what was attempted by philosophy in the field of logico-eidetics is a part, just as much as what Heidegger set forth as an *apophansis* of essence in Levinas’s sense) can reveal itself to us only in that which we have labeled the *phenomenological sublime*.

In respect and recognition of this double-articulated distance, our question will be the following: on the one hand, is there a circularity of the ‘ethical’ and something like the possibility of the sublime in Levinas? In recurrence, persecution, substitution, and prophetism, does the infinitizing of the infinite not already involve an ‘enlargement’ of phenomenality to the infinite, to a phenomenological *apeiron* of which the Levinasian Infinite would, to be sure, be the *other* side and thus outside of phenomenality? Must we not understand here something like Kant’s lesson on the possibility of the “spirit” in the third *Critique*? On the other hand, does not the infinite which is outside of phenomenality, the infinite which is absolutely infinite, require, always already, and paradoxically outside the theme, its symbolic tautology; namely, that by which ‘all’ (of the beyond of all ontology) leads to it and from which ‘all’ proceeds? Although it is true that there is, strictly speaking, no

Levinasian theology, there is nevertheless in his work the extraordinary confrontational [*contestatrice*], critical, and even skeptical power (which he is pleased to emphasize) of a most paradoxical and nearly impossible “reflection on God,” wherein the utopia of what is outside themes, outside *noema*, and outside essence does not impede reflection, but, on the contrary, gives it its weight, life, and movement.

Let us return to the question at hand. Speaking of the passivity of the Saying always in the first person, Levinas writes: “But the denomination here is only a pronomination; there is *nothing* that is named *I*; the *I* is said by him that speaks” (AE 72; OB 56). Here is already at play the enigma of identity of the self where the trace “of that which is always already past . . . and which, as a pro-noun, marks with its seal all that a noun can convey” is revealed (AE 233; OB 185). We have followed the profound movement of this pro-nomination of prophetism which is the co-existence of the obsession with the Other in the face, which “is already the intrigue of the Infinite,” and which, exceeding all time and essence, “leaves a trace” (AE 115n.31; OB 193n.31). This trace is that of the “gaping open of an abyss in proximity,” that of “the infinite which blinks” (AE 118; OB 93), and which in hollowing out the abyss infinitely enlarges the passive side of responsibility (“the more I answer the more I am responsible” [AE 118; OB 93]). The infinite leaves its trace as an “*inordinateness*” and as the “infinity of the Infinite” (AE 119; OB 94). In other words, it is left as the infinite trace of the retreat of the infinite.¹² This does not mean that one could master this trace by way of an asymptotic approach to the *Sollen* (as with Fichte much more so than with Kant), because in this trace is hollowed out the glory of the Infinite *qua* the exteriority of *Illeity* (AE 120n.35; OB 193n.35). What could this mean other than that if, as we have said, the other is terrifying because of its terrifying persecutorial obsession, then this is because it *appears* nevertheless *sublime* in the infinite distancing which hollows out in the very heart of the approach, and which is the bearer of the death of the self which, in recurrence, despairs of ever finding itself? Isn’t this the very thing that first Hegel and after him Sartre misunderstood when they unilaterally interpreted the look of the other as a look which destroys or kills? Does not the phenomenality of the face go all the way to this hollowing out of itself to infinity, to the *unimaginable*, or to that of which imagination has no ‘idea’? And does not the debt appear infinite, proportionate to this immanence, itself infinite, of the death of the self which thinks to find itself in the face-to-face with itself and with the other? It is characteristic of Levinas that he does not ask himself about this ‘negative’ side of the encounter and of proximity. Here, undoubtedly, is the expression of a ‘happiness’ or rather a trust which is perhaps already religious, given that it was not the trust or happiness of the philosophers.

Consequently, the meaning of substitution and reversal is itself susceptible to taking on another meaning and of leading, in fact, to that which is *truly* sublime. This is so because what is only apprehended negatively in proximity, as the death of the ego linked to its concept or its representation, here reverses itself in the diastasis of identity as the encounter with the Infinite. And it is this Infinite which immemorially has always already ordered—thus absolving me, in the discovery of my creaturely status, of the relationship—the fear which changes or reverses itself into a giving of thanks to the glory of the Infinite. It is the Infinite as well which has always already *instituted* me in my identity without a concept, beyond the failure of the schematization of the imagination; this institution is *symbolic* because it is non-phenomenological, being itself without cause or *arche*, i.e., anarchic. But in what regard may I say or ‘know’ it if not because what institutes it, God, or the Infinite, is supreme, unique in its kind or because, as Levinas writes citing Malebranche: “The Infinite is unto itself its own idea” (AE 124n.36; OB 193n.36)? In our terms we could say that this is the very expression of the symbolic tautology. I am only capable of possessing the idea of the infinite because the infinite, always already, has made itself infinite in commanding to me the face of the Other (*Autre*). The Other *qua* Other (which is already a symbolic tautology, although a non-thematizable one) only maintains itself as such because behind its phenomenality, but equally in it as its blinking,¹³ the Infinite is already “at work” as the dynamic trace of its own flight or as “the gasp for air” or the “emptying of being” which it leaves in its wake. As the site of a symbolic tautology unique in its kind,¹⁴ the Infinite is that itself which, in the field of encounter and of proximity, *can be experienced phenomenologically in the being-out-of-phase [porte-à-faux]* of what, each time, seems to appear from the face relative to what infinitely draws back from it and breathes it in, in its distance and its absence. Now this phenomenological ordeal is that of the *sublime* of which the anguish of death, the terrifying side of persecution, is only the negative aspect for a self which contracts into itself in its self-conservation, which we know is nothing but that of its phantoms (and phantasms). To bear the weight of the other and of the world is (as Levinas has very clearly stated) “divine discomfort” (AE 157; OB 122) only insofar as it is also, for us, the very discomfort of the *sublime*, of that which calls me and thereby summons me beyond limits which nevertheless cannot be located in the world. In this sense, prophetism, at least as meant by Levinas, is also in part the phenomenological ordeal of the sublime, of what overwhelms us totally in the “enigma of a God speaking in man and of man not counting on any god” (AE 196; OB 154).

What belongs to the “passage” of God (which is not a something which comes to pass on the order of an event) in me and in the other is not only that which makes it possible for me also to be “another for others” by way of substitution and renewal, but it is also the opening of my neighbor to the neighbor of the other and from this, to the possibility of justice and the fraternal and incarnate community of neighbors. We only point out this final ‘moment’ (which we shall not examine here) for the sake of the completeness of the problematic, all the more because it is here as well that Levinas places the possibility of the birth of philosophy. But we must ask once more, is this the only possibility? Is not the possibility only at that site where all the weight of the foundation or institution of humanity is borne by the ethical ‘dimension’ *qua* the exclusive ‘site’ of the absolutely other, in the abyssal, and thus for us sublime, vacillation of its symbolic tautology where, well before the Greeks, human beings encountered each other as human beings in the anarchy of a foundation in the One that could not be referred to the *arche* of a despotic/political foundation?

Thanks to Levinas, we rediscover here something of the extraordinary and terrifying and thus also something of the sublime grandeur. This is remarkable and in every way new, though with a purpose that is through and through philosophical. What we wish to *add* (and not in the least to ‘object’) is that our extension of phenomenality sets forth perhaps more clearly its originality and thus its uniqueness which is itself irreducible. There are other possible trials of the sublime, as the Kantian examples taken from nature indicate. The error, which was more Heidegger’s than Husserl’s, was to attempt to think of phenomenality in terms of tauto-logy or *Ereignis*. Indeed, one must understand that the phenomenon is it-‘self’ non-tautological, being always already and *for all time* penetrated by absence and infinity. The obsession with the infinite is not only the obsession with the human, as the Greeks, and no doubt principally Plato, told us in every way. This infinity, which is also transcendence of a radical and originary absence over presence and which is itself also beyond essence, has never waited for me and never will. In this sense, it orders nothing and orders nothing of me. It is only the infinite part of the *apeiron* which agitates all limits from within by infinitizing them and which makes of all stasis or phase of presence the *precarious* temporalization of an immemorial/immature which is always already and always still in the ‘process’ of proto-temporalization. This is a radically untamed abyss of a non-physical *physis* which is not ‘represented’ (as it is in Aristotle and then in the Moderns) in a physical theory. In other words, this is a *physis* which is neither rational nor thematic. It is a radical in-nocence of becoming (as in Nietzsche) from which the human appears clearly as the most strange

and precarious, and whose liberty has, irreducibly, an untamed dimension because it is originally innocent—well before all calculations, machinations, and subtleties of the symbolic institution which free human beings can only encounter as the contingency of the *nomos*. The wisdom of the Greeks, at least at its core, does not come from some sort of flight before the divine order (something Levinas never says), nor simply from the demand for justice presented by the appearance of the third party (something he does say). This is so because the trial of the *apeiron* of the *physis* is no less sublime than the trial of the neighbor in proximity. It comes from a source different than the symbolic institution, and if there are affinities, well indicated by Levinas, between his reflections on the Infinite and the Platonic reflections on the One in the *Parmenides* (and in Plotinus, cf. AE 121; OB 95), then this One is not God (this would be, roughly speaking, the return of Philo and moreover of Neoplatonic Christianity). Rather, the One is precisely that which hollows itself out as an abyss in every being (Idea) and which, in the sublime dissolution of all ideal relations and from its non-position in being, makes of every being (or every essence) a precarious equilibrium or harmony. Older and *younger* than itself, the One is the horizon of the immemorial/immature in every logico-eidetic prematuration. It is that which, by its in-finite burrowing, is the very movement of every *epoché* and every skepticism, the corrosive power well known in all of neoplatonism.

Certainly the modern epoch has only retained an inverted or perverted version of this wisdom in its morbid fascination with the *inhuman* character of an operational rationality which is supposed to function completely independently. The harmonies intended by the Greeks are frozen in logico-mathematical laws of a ‘nature’ which is supposed to function as a logico-mathematical *automaton*, a veritable divine unconscious which turns like a wheel only occasionally in need of the hand of God for a push to ‘wind up’ once again this world machine. By virtue of this one knows that one can finally ‘pass up this hypothesis,’ since everything resolves itself into the *Gestell* of nature, of which the technico-scientific *Gestell* would only be the mimetic double. Confronted by such extreme nihilism, it is no wonder that the thought of Levinas should be so necessary and helpful. There is surely, however, something very modern in his obsession with the human and in the radical nature of his position which doubtlessly few people are yet ready to hear. This is so to the extent that they will be tempted to find an imaginary refuge in the forgetfulness of this radical quality and in the blindness to all that it implies of the sublime, as though this were a work which—despite its intentions—would deliver the key to humanity. There is in this respect, however paradoxical this might appear,

namely, a sort of Levinasian ‘optimism’ which corresponds to his ‘religiosity.’ Indeed, no matter the extent of his extreme shrewdness and the great refinement of his rigor, rendered inescapable through the necessity of negotiating with every suspicion that risks insinuating itself with respect to the ethical ‘dimension,’ there appears, nevertheless, a short circuit of this suspicious reflection at the very bottom of the work; namely, a confidence or a faith in the Infinite. It is not so much a faith in the Infinite as such—because as such it is irreducible in its symbolic tautology—but rather a faith in the extent to which the Infinite directs, and directs *me*, to Him in the face of the other. One of the symptoms of this confidence is his thinking about prophetism which, as extremely attentive as it is to prophetism’s absolute originality, does not perhaps delve sufficiently into the depths of the ruse which would distinguish ‘true’ from ‘false’ prophets. This is a question, as we have pointed out, that links up with the difficulty of purifying the diachrony which is beyond all synchrony, and which is finally, for us, one of knowing what distinguishes the *apeiron* of an irreducibly immemorial/immature meaning at once from a signification premature in its presence (concept, *eidos*, thought, essence) and from the Infinite that is, so to speak, absolutely and infinitely infinite. The suspicion, but also the *skepsis* of the Greeks, would here be to think that this is perhaps still saying *too much* and that there is here a *determination* which, although anarchic, immemorial, and pre-originary, creates all the *symbolic* circularity of what is in fact, truly, the symbolic tautology of the infinite. Whereas the infinite, as the immemorial *and* immature *apeiron* of the untamed and non-physical *physis* in the enlarged phenomenality of *every* phenomenon, engages in nothing and determines nothing because it orders nothing. It is in-nocent and ir-responsible, and, in the human sphere, always already taken up by the ruses of the *symbolic* unconscious, namely, that of psychoanalysis.

This only leaves the enigma of the human more open, where this sublime irresponsibility is no less terrifying. This enigma is consequently found at two levels: first, at the level of *nomos*, that is, at the level of the contingency of the symbolic institution (the non-homogeneous collection of symbolic systems: languages, cultures, social and socio-political practices) where we always already live; second, at the level of symbolic instituting insofar as it is an-anarchic and non-determining, and therefore does not determine the symbolic institution, but rather where the human is susceptible to meeting its own *enigma* as radical contingency from the ontological point of view. One must admit that philosophy has delivered us very little in regard to this encounter, with the remarkable exception of Kant to whom Levinas pays tribute though he omits the problematic of the sublime (AE 166, OB 129). On

this crucial point, which concerns our very life in its deepest elements, it is true that the Jewish tradition, but also the Christian, provides us with elaborations that are irreplaceable. Levinas's own elaboration, whose inspiration is no less philosophical, is irreplaceable in the highest degree, and it allows us to renew a fruitful dialogue, beyond that which had become so encumbered with numerous misunderstandings, and to return, thanks to his powerful originality, to the substructure of our tradition which is at the same time irreducibly Jewish, Christian, and Greek.

Here we must, by way of tribute, repay a small part of our debt to Levinas. After Kant, he is one of those who has most clearly shown us that the human enigma involves more than this world, that in some sense it lies beyond it—though not in a beyond which is an ‘other’ world or a ‘world behind the world’—and that, what Kant called our “suprasensible destination” is in fact a “destination” which is supra- or extraworldly. There therefore remains *before* us, though in the indeterminate, a ‘speculative site’ where the apparent deficiencies of Greek wisdom in regard to the enigma of the humanity of human beings may yet turn back into a phenomenological ‘generosity’ of the radically untamed *apeiron*. In the sublime savagery of its innocence, in the phenomenality, which is for all time immemorial and immature, of the infinite in each phenomenon, something of the meeting of the other human being may doubtlessly still over-take itself unexpectedly, on the hither side but equally on the hinter side of that which, itself also on the hither and hinter sides, hollows itself out indefinitely in the proximity of responsibility. This is a complex and ‘speculative site’ articulated as the gap and further intersection of the two ‘hinter and hither sides.’ This is a site where one certainly should not rush things, but where the phenomena, themselves infinite, of the untamed *apeiron* of the *physis* are perhaps less distant than one would think from the Levinasian Infinite, and where perhaps they might otherwise support the tension between obsession and freedom, though this tension is irreducible, because antinomic. This is possible perhaps because there is also in freedom, as an untamed freedom of the *apeiron*, a passivity more passive than any passivity (namely, that of the phenomenological unconscious from which the encodings of the symbolic unconscious take their goods ‘without shame’). To ‘be’ a phenomenologist today is perhaps to say that the initiative of liberty is only the secondary and anachronic version of a radically passive innocence which has always already preceded it in the immemorial, but which also will always follow it in the immature. It is perhaps this also which makes it possible to carry the weight of the world and the human. And if God, even He, dreamed? An

impossible dream, unless one thinks that there is also something infinite in the dream.

Translated by Mark Gedney

NOTES

1. In addition, we shall limit our investigation to the last systematic work published, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*.
2. See J. Taminiaux, *Le regard et l'excédent* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1977), specifically the study entitled, “Remarques sur Heidegger et les Recherches logiques de Husserl,” pp. 156-82.
3. An abyss which Levinas designated in a very fine article dedicated to Husserl as the “La ruine de la représentation” in EDE. Also published in *Husserl et la pensée moderne* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1959).
4. For all of this, see our works, *Phénomènes, temps et êtres* (Grenoble: J. Millon, 1987) and *Phénoménologie et institution symbolique* (Grenoble: J. Millon, 1988).
5. [Levinas's use of the verb, *ordonner*, is awkward to translate. Often one thinks of the ordinary transitive use of the verb either in the rather neutral sense of arranging *something* according to some plan, or in the stronger sense of commanding *something* to be done (*Il m'ordonne de me taire*, “He orders me to be silent”). The latter captures the strong and forceful nature of Levinas's use of the word, but his frequent use of the term to characterize a specific relation between the Infinite and the self or between the self and a face, rather than the self and some non-personal task or object (*something*), is somewhat abnormal. (For example, “The negativity of this anarchy . . . ordains me to the other.”) I shall translate *ordonner*, therefore, with a number of different terms (as does Lingis), such as “directs,” “ordains,” “orders,” etc., in order to produce as coherent and readable a translation as possible without doing an injustice to the force of Levinas's text.—Trans.]
6. [I shall translate *se creuser* in a variety of fashions, depending on the context. Principally however, following Lingis, as “hollows itself out.”—Trans.]
7. [Levinas here plays on the connection of the French pronoun *il* (‘he’ or ‘it’) and the Latin pronoun, *ille* (that one).—Trans.]
8. In this regard, compare his wonderful address to the Heidegger Colloquium at the Collège International de Philosophie, “Mourir pour . . .,” in *Heidegger, Questions ouvertes: Collège International de Philosophie* (Paris: Osiris, 1988), pp. 255-64.
9. AE 231; OB 183. [Following both Richir and Levinas's habit of capitalizing

Dire and Dit, I have consistently capitalized “the Saying” and “the Said.” Lingis does not consistently do this in his classic translation of *Autrement qu’être*, and I shall, in order to maintain consistency, amend his translation in this regard.—Trans.]

10. The reference to *Being and Time* is very clear here.
11. [Richir (and also Levinas) makes full use of the ambivalence in the French verb *entendre* (and its correlates) which can refer to intention, to hearing, or to understanding in these remarks about prophecy.—Trans.]
12. In AE 119n.34; OB 193n.34, Levinas cites Hegel in regard to the “bad infinite” in order to challenge Hegel’s view with his own account of the infinite moving away of the finite in the approach of the Other as a radical alterity.
13. For further remarks concerning the concept of blinking [*clignotement*], understood as being the very essence of phenomenality, see my *Recherches phénoménologiques*, I, II, III (vol. 1), IV, V (vol. 2) (Brussels: Ousia, 1981 and 1983).
14. This is also the enigmatic “site” of the establishment of all modern thought from Nicolas of Cusa, Giordano Bruno, Descartes, Leibniz, and Kant (in the sublime) to Schelling, Hegel and Husserl. This is true even if, with certain modern philosophers just as in modern science, the symbolic tautology of the infinite has taken on a mathematical character (“asymptotic” in Levinasian terms). See our work, *La crise du sens et la phénoménologie: Autour de la “Krisis” de Husserl* (Grenoble: J. Millon, Collection ‘Krisis’, 1990).