

To simply say that the ego leaves itself is a contradiction, since, in quitting itself the ego carries itself away [*s'emporte*], unless it sinks into the impersonal.¹

Chapter 2

Being, *Il y a* and Hypostasis

Levinas extended his rethinking of the relation of being and the human in his post-war essays, *Existence and Existents* and *Time and the Other*. In these works, he attempts to articulate a notion of subjectivity and being distinct from the Heideggerian characterisation of relation of *Dasein* and Being. This chapter examines Levinas' apparent reversal of the Heideggerian distinction of Being and beings, and the manner in which Levinas explores the moment of the advent of finite being, starting with the unavoidable fact that "there is" [*il y a*] being.

With the notion of *il y a* and the hypostatic relation of the existent to *il y a*, Levinas approaches a dimension of signification which necessarily arises out of the relation to being but is not reducible to this relation. The relation of an existent to existence describes a duality of singularity and anonymity, which is not equivalent to the distinction between authentic and inauthentic *Dasein*. Exploring the instant of the existent's attachment to existence, Levinas introduces a notion of subjectivity which by definition, postpones the anonymity of *il y a*. In this sense, the subject is always a unique identity. It is out of this relation of the existent and existence, that Levinas re-locates the origins of signification in the

¹ E. Levinas, *Existence and Existents* (EE), trans. A. Lingis, (London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1988), p. 96. French edition (DE), (Paris: Vrin, 1993), p. 164-165. Translation modified.

postponement of anonymity. These works thereby introduce the question of the foundations of intentional consciousness and the meaning-giving act of representation by elaborating on the manner of subjective attachment to existence.

In *Existence and Existents*, Levinas is still concerned with the question of a departure from being and, in his preface, he calls this an ex-cendence toward the Good, thereby introducing an ethical dimension, beyond being.² Nevertheless, he insists that while ex-cendence is "a departure from being and from the categories which describe it", the movement and the Good "necessarily have a foothold in being, and that is why being is better than non-being".³ The apparent reversal of the ontological distinction involved in establishing unique identities, has this dimension added to it which does not subordinate being to the ethical but rather suggests that the answer to the ontological question: Why being rather than nothing?, must be supplemented. Levinas' description of his approach in the preface to *Existence and Existents* suggest that being, in contrast to non-being is justified only on the basis of a necessity or need that itself points to an ontological impossibility.⁴ However, as he adds, *Existence and Existents* focuses on the existent's attachment to being while continually anticipating themes reserved for future works. Nevertheless, behind the discussion and development of the notion of *il y a*, lies a concern to rethink of the existent's relation to the social totality. The thought of a beyond to this relation of existence and the existent is approached as a relation to another who interrupts this ontological attachment and introduces a notion of "world" distinctly different from the Heideggerian notion.

² EE 15/DE 9.

³ EE 15/DE 9.

⁴ This idea is recognised by others and expressed in a number of ways. Critchley for example

i) Ontological Separation versus Ontological Difference

The most profound thing about *Being and Time* for me is this Heideggerian distinction [of existence and the existent]. But in Heidegger there is a distinction, not a separation. Existing is always grasped in the existent ...⁵

What is the difference between distinction and separation? What is the difference between Levinas' claim that the existent is irremissibly attached to being, and the apparently Heideggerian notion Levinas introduces here, in which existing is always grasped in the existent? The question concerns the interpretation of "ontological difference".

For Levinas, Heidegger distinguishes the beings that *are* from the work of being.⁶ The distinction does not suggest that being is a different kind of being, but that being is not a being at all. The distinction is not conceivable as a difference between entities or even as a difference of kind, insofar as "kind" suggests a class of objects, which being is not. In this sense, the distinction is indeterminate, or fundamentally indeterminate.

Despite this distinction, there is no "separation", according to Levinas, because "existing [*l'exister*] is always possessed by someone".⁷ That someone is *Dasein* possibility of itself: to be itself or not itself".⁸ The problem with Heidegger's analysis, as Levinas explains in the paper *Is Ontology Fundamental?*, is not that being is ultimately subjective, but that "[o]ur concrete existence is interpreted in terms of its entry into the 'openness' of being in general".⁹ For Levinas, as this thesis attempts to argue, this notion that the human is reduced to a relation to

⁵ TO 44-45/TA 133.

⁶ EE 17/DE 15-16.

⁷ TO 45/TA 133.

⁸ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 33.

⁹ *Is Ontology Fundamental?*, BW 5.

being, exhibits a fundamental bias or interest, a concern for essence despite its claims to refuse all essentialising. Although, at the time of *Existence and Existents*, Levinas is preoccupied with the question of the relation of subjectivity and existence, I suggest this is ultimately to reveal how the signification of the human in subjective being, does not lie in the subjective relation to being, nor a merely subjective preference for other beings. As early as 1951 Levinas writes:

One cannot prefer as the condition of ontology a relation with beings over the fundamental thesis that every relation with a being presupposes the intimacy of the forgetfulness of being.¹⁰

For Levinas, it is not a matter of merely asserting the idea that there is being without a subject or without *Dasein*; that Being which has the understanding of Being as its very mode of Being. Nor is it a matter of claiming the priority of a relation of the existent to someone or something other than being. Rather it is a matter of demonstrating how another makes a claim upon me that interrupts the relation to being, so as to give the indeterminacy and anonymity of the subjective relation to being a positive signification. This remains to be demonstrated.

Existence and Existents begins this task with a critique of the relation of subject and existence. Levinas elaborates on the specificity of his approach with regard to the question of Being and the ontological difference. As the French title suggests, he intends to start with being and move toward the existent, thereby apparently reversing the manner in which Heidegger approached the question of being. As I will argue below, the meaning of this apparent reversal of the Heideggerian approach is complicated by Levinas' own rethinking of the relation between impersonal being and the existent. This reversal has been the topic of

¹⁰ *Is Ontology Fundamental?*, BW 5.

much debate in secondary literature, prompted in part by Derrida's questions to Levinas on this point in his essay *Violence and Metaphysics*. As Derrida writes:

Being, since it is *nothing* outside the existent, a theme which Levinas had commented upon so well previously, could in no way *precede* the existent, whether in time, or in dignity, etc.¹¹

While Derrida finds that Levinas recognises the difficulty of his attempt to begin with being rather than *Dasein*, he maintains that any attempt by Levinas to do so must have made a fundamental error in its interpretation of Heidegger. Derrida continues, reiterating that being is only the *being-of* the existent, and consequently "does not exist outside it as a foreign power, or as a hostile or neutral impersonal element".¹² He asserts that neutrality can only be the "characteristic of an undetermined existent, of an anonymous ontic power".¹³ As another commentator adds:

The interpretation of Heideggerian ontological difference as ontological separation stands in danger of fundamentally mistaking a central intention of Heidegger. The thought of a general, neutral Being is not Heideggerian.¹⁴

For Levinas, the problem is precisely that anonymity, or neutrality, for Heidegger, can only be conceived as an undetermined ontic power which,

¹¹ J. Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas", in *Writing and Difference*, trans. A. Bass, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 136.

¹² Derrida, *Violence and Metaphysics*, p. 136.

¹³ Derrida, *Violence and Metaphysics*, p. 136.

¹⁴ "Die von Heidegger aufgemachte ontologische Differenz als ontologische Trennung

Gedanke eines allgemeinen, neutralen Seins ist Heidegger fremd", K. Huizing, *Das Sein und der*

furthermore, has a derivative if not derogatory status. The question of impersonality or neutrality is a fundamental concern that Levinas has at the very start of *Existence and Existents*. The attempt to begin his analysis by asking the question of Being, separated from any being, is concerned to reveal assumptions underlying Heidegger's question. For Levinas, the problem is not so much the priority of being [], but the reduction of the existent, of effective existence, to a Being that has the understanding of Being as its mode of Being. It is not a question of whether being comes before or after the existent, but as Levinas suggests, a matter of how we think the meaning of the distinction. The relation, Levinas argues "occurs" in the instant of the "polarisation" of being in general (which is neither a 'something' in general, nor a concept or a principle).¹⁵ To start with this instant is not merely to reverse the relation of Being and beings, starting with an assumption about the meaning of Being, but to ask the question of the meaning of this difference:

This reversal will have been only the first step of a movement that, opening onto an ethics much older than ontology, will allow the signifying of signification beyond the ontological difference, what, without doubt is, in the end, the very signification of Infinity.¹⁶

Levinas begins his analyses in *Existence and Existents* by recognising the difficulty, even impossibility, of "philosophical reflection" on the difference between Being and beings:

¹⁵ EE 18/DE 16-17.

¹⁶

The distinction between that which exists and its existence itself ... beings designated by substantives, and the event or act of their existence, imposes itself on philosophical

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The danger in asking the question of Being, Levinas explains, is that being is interpreted as a cause, or a "'Being' [] in general [that will] be 'a being' [] and not the deed, activity, pure event or work, of Being []".¹⁸ The impossibility of separation is not an accident. Being and beings are not independent, for "a being has always made a contract with Being []" and exercises in an instant "the domination a subject exercises over its attributes".¹⁹ The issue is that being [] is not an attribute and this domination exercised by a subject is not equivalent to a subject-predicate relation, but is in a certain sense prior to any such relation:

Being [] cannot be specified, and does not specify anything. It is not a quality which an object supports, nor what supports qualities. Nor is it the act of a subject, even though in the expression "this is" Being [] immediately obliged to state that this attribute adds nothing to the subject.²⁰

In other words, the problem, for Levinas, is not that the priority of this peculiar relation to being is a transcendental condition of thinking. For Levinas, the problem is that phenomenological analysis works back to this instant in which the

¹⁷ EE 17/DE 15.

¹⁸ EE 17/DE 15-16. Where the **English** translation does not concord with my decision not to translate Levinas' as Being, I have added the original in square brackets, rather than modify the translation.

¹⁹ EE 17/DE 16.

²⁰ EE 18/DE 17.

contract with being is discerned and sees it "as something that cannot be decomposed".²¹

The exact relation of Levinas' thought to that of Heidegger here appears ambiguous. On the one hand it could be argued that is it precisely the decomposition of this contract with being (understood in Heideggerian terms as a pre-ontological understanding of Being), that is the ultimate aim of Heidegger's existential analytic of *Dasein* which itself remains a preliminary step. Furthermore, it could be suggested that the unfolding of the ontological character of *Dasein* is the precondition of Levinas' own "decomposition" of the "instant". That is, Levinas' analysis must itself begin with the assumption that there is a specific mode of Being which has the understanding of Being as its mode of Being. In other words, Levinas' own question must presuppose that mode of Being open to the question of the meaning of Being. As suggested above, the problem, for Levinas, is that insofar as Heidegger approaches the question of Being with an analysis of *Dasein*, subjectivity is interpreted solely in terms of its existence. Ontology becomes "the essence of every relation with beings and of every relation in being".²² This "fundamental ontology" reconstructs the constituents of the instant as an immanent circle of origin.²³

A distinction between Levinas and Heidegger at this point hinges on whether it can be argued that Levinas is aware of the impossibility of escaping this immanent circle, even as he attempts to go beyond it. As the analysis in Chapter One of the impossibility of evasion would suggest, this problem is precisely what preoccupies Levinas. The impossibility of approaching being, the idea that nothing is prior to this relation to being, is interpreted by Heidegger as a case of a subject not being able to go beyond a certain limit, the possibility of

²¹ EE 17/DE 16.

²² *Is Ontology Fundamental?*, BW 4.

²³ For a more detailed account of this immanent 'circle of origin' and Levinas' critique of it see F. Ciaramelli, 'Peperzak, *Ethics as First Philosophy: The Significance of Emmanuel Levinas for Philosophy, Literature and Religion* (1995).

impossibility in authentic Being-toward-death. For Levinas, this rejection of a beyond and of an "impossible approach" is a fundamental assumption of the Heideggerian perspective. In making this assumption, Heidegger falls prey to the logic of non-contradiction at the very moment he recognises its limit. For Levinas, however, the impossibility of decomposing the instant is a logical rather than a concrete fact. The concrete signification of this impossibility involves the recognition of "separation". Its first expression is in terms of *il y a* and "hypostasis", which will be discussed below.

For the moment it must be emphasised that Levinas' 'reversal' has nothing to do with a conception of the relation of Being and being as a relation of two existents, but with the fact uncovered by Heidegger himself of the primacy of the Same - expressed here as the impossibility of decomposing the instant. As Bouckaert suggests, for Levinas:

Even the ontological difference is no longer able to verbalise the break with the Self, because the distinction between Being and beings continues to be situated in the domain of light.²⁴

This "domain of light" defines the boundaries of the phenomenological horizon, the instant beyond which nothing exists. Levinas' 'inversion' consists in approaching *Dasein*, or what Levinas will call the existent, starting from the irremissible fact that "Being [] cannot be specified",²⁵ rather than on the basis of this 'fact' turning to an analysis of the subject:

Are we not, then, obliged to see in the very difficulty we have of understanding the category according to which Being [] belongs to a being the mark of *the*

²⁴ L. Bouckaert, "Ontology and ethics: Reflections on Levinas' critique of Heidegger", *International Philosophical Quarterly* 10/3 (September, 1970), p. 407.

²⁵ EE 18/DE 17.

impersonal character of Being [] in general? Does not Being [] in general become the being of "a being" by an inversion, by that event which is the present ...?²⁶

For Levinas, Heidegger has taken this inversion for granted. The impossibility of approaching being, as a being, immediately points to being. Being is that which is "alien and strikes against us".²⁷ Such being is not the most universal or general concept, but the impersonal, unnamable and ungraspable realm of what Levinas calls *il y a*. Having introduced this impossibility, Levinas suggests that it is "attested to by certain moments in human existence where the adherence of existence to an existent appears like a cleaving".²⁸ The duality of existence and the existent is not assumed but is shown to reveal itself in an analysis of the existent itself. In other words, despite the apparent reversal of Being and being, Levinas insists that the analysis requires that we begin with the existent.

ii) The Impersonal and its Other

What is the distinction here between being in general and the impersonal, unnameable realm of *il y a*? In his paper *Violence and Metaphysics*, Derrida claims that it is "paradoxical to see the Heideggerian city governed by a neutral power, by an anonymous discourse, that is, by the one whose inauthenticity Heidegger was first to describe".²⁹ It is indeed paradoxical, but is anonymity always inauthentic [*uneigentlich*] in the sense of a loss of one's own Being-in-the-world? There are two kinds of anonymity discernible in Heidegger. On the one

²⁶ EE 18/DE 17-18 (my italics).

²⁷ EE 23/DE 28.

²⁸ EE 22/DE 27.

²⁹ Derrida, *Violence and Metaphysics*, p. 137.

hand, Heidegger describes the anonymity of the "they" [*das Man*]. This is the mode of inauthenticity; of the dispersion of *Dasein* into an everyday immersion in the world and one's relation to entities. On the other hand, it could also be argued that there is a certain anonymity of the authentic mode of *Dasein* in anxiety.

Derrida seems to recognise this latter notion when he adds that there is a certain anonymity in Heidegger, insofar as the *Logos* is the *Logos* of no one. However, Derrida claims that this anonymity is not oppression, it is only "the possibility of the name and of responsibility".³⁰ In relation to the question concerning the conception of anonymity as condition of possibility, Derrida quotes Heidegger:

But if man must one day arrive in the neighbourhood of Being, he must first learn to exist in the nameless.³¹

To exist in the nameless, according to Heidegger in the *Letter on Humanism*, is to think language as the "house of Being", and thought as the engagement by and for Being.³² The nameless is not the realm of the irrational, but the bringing of thought back to its element, which Heidegger claims had already been forgotten by Plato and Aristotle in their notion of thought as *techne* and *theoria*.³³ To learn to exist in the nameless is thus to learn to hear the "es", the "it" of "*es gibt*"; literally "it gives", but translated as "there is". In the *Letter on Humanism*, Heidegger, in discussing the distinction between the French *il y a*

³⁰ Derrida, *Violence and Metaphysics*, p. 137. The question of oppression and anonymity will be discussed below.

³¹ From Derrida, *Violence and Metaphysics*, p. 137. Derrida is quoting from M. Heidegger,

³² Heidegger, , p. 5. Answering his French addresser he suggests we can say these together as 'de l'Etre', p. 5/194.

³³ Heidegger, , p. 6/194.

and the German *es gibt*, claims that while the French suggests "there is" Being, the German already states the fact that "the 'it' which here 'gives', is Being itself".³⁴ For Heidegger, "giving" names the essence or essencing of Being, but also avoids the expression "Being is". He finds that the French *il y a* not only overlooks this essence but is in danger of suggesting that "Being is".³⁵

Heidegger suggests that, "[b]efore he speaks man must first allow himself to be spoken to/approached [*ansprechen*]"³⁶ For Heidegger, to hear this call is to avoid the seductions of the public realm and the impotence of the private and to allow oneself to be claimed by Being.³⁷ Thus to hear the appeal [*Anspruch*] of Being, is to think the essence [*Wesen*] of man, and thought, more originally, beyond these engagements in a socio-political dimension in which man forgets the question of Being.³⁸

Although Levinas did not have these analyses of Heidegger available to him at the time of *Existence and Existents*, there is no doubt that he recognises two forms of anonymity in Heidegger, in terms of the distinction between *Dasein's* inauthenticity and authenticity. He recognises the anonymity of everyday existence in the "they" (which includes the public and the private opposition above), and the anonymity or neutrality of *Dasein's* relation to Being. The latter is covered over in *Being and Time* by the claim that *Dasein* is its ownmost possibility in its Being-toward-death, to which one is awakened by the indeterminacy of Being or the no-thingness of Being. It is not the possibility of the creation of a moral hierarchy which is at issue for Levinas, instead, I suggest that he is concerned with Heidegger's insistence that the indeterminacy of Being

³⁴ Heidegger, , p. 22/214.

³⁵ Heidegger, , p. 22/214.

³⁶ Heidegger, , p. 10/199.

³⁷ Heidegger, , p. 8/197.

³⁸ It should be acknowledge here that Heidegger's turn to Being is meant to be a positive refusal of the public discussion below suggests, Levinas asks whether in this rejection Heidegger may not have inadvertently given the derogatory status, and asserted the age old opposition of the social and the singular.

becomes a moment of *Dasein's* ownmost possibility. Despite the fact that Heidegger insists that this is a possibility of impossibility, for Levinas, it nevertheless limits the shock of the relation to indeterminate being through reducing this relation to a projection of *Dasein's* future. Heidegger's error is to locate *Dasein* in its authentic mode at this juncture. Levinas, on the other hand, finds that this is precisely the juncture which renders every assumption of "authentic" *Dasein* impossible.³⁹ It is a moment of the impossibility of nothingness, an impossibility insinuated at the heart of the present attachment to being and not in a future.⁴⁰

In *Time and the Other*, Levinas conceives of the relation of inauthenticity and authenticity in Heidegger's early work as an expression of an old antinomy of the social and the singular. In this antinomy, one side is always constructed as the degradation of the other.⁴¹ At a more general level, Levinas argues in *Existence and Existents*, that the configuration of authenticity and inauthenticity points to the fact that the "dialectic of Being [] and nothingness continues to dominate ontology".⁴² According to Levinas, the consequences for Heidegger are that "Being [] contains no other vice than its limitation and nothingness".⁴³ There is nothing to fear in being except its end. For Levinas, what this means is that this end is merely a limit imposed by the approach to being of the already existing existent: the already existing existent approaching its own end, discovering its own limits. What Heidegger must leave out of this dialectic is the hold that being itself has on us:

It is because the there is has such a complete hold on us that we cannot take nothingness and death lightly, and we tremble before them. The fear of nothingness is but the

³⁹ TO 71/TA 166.

⁴⁰ TO 69/TA 163.

⁴¹ TO 58/TA 149.

⁴² EE 20/DE 20.

⁴³ EE 20/DE 20.

measure of our involvement in Being []. Existence of itself harbours something tragic which is not only there because of its finitude.⁴⁴

For Levinas, the horror of nothingness is but a phase of a more general state of existence, the fear *of* being just as originary as the fear *for* being expressed in anxiety over death. This more general state is the anonymous realm of *il y a* which is irreducible to either side of the Heideggerian dichotomy.

iii) *Il y a* and the Impossible Instance

While the notion of *il y a* becomes crucial to Levinas' critique of the priority of the *es gibt*, he does not assert that "Being is". With the notion of *il y a*, Levinas attempts to think an original duality of existence and the existent which does not begin with the assumption that the existent discovers its authentic Being in the process of a withdrawal from the world in which it is originally immersed. As we will see in the following chapter, Levinas will also attempt to redefine the nature of the existent's immersion in a world, based on this original duality. In other words, the notion of *il y a* has repercussions for Levinas' rethinking of the socio-political and the relation of the subject to the social totality and is not merely an excursion into the metaphysical without consequence.⁴⁵ For the

⁴⁴ EE 20/DE 21.

⁴⁵ I agree with Jean-Luc Lannoy's general assertion that Levinas' notion of *il y a* has historical and political concerns of Levinas' two major works, *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*

Revue Philosophique de Louvain 88 (1990), p. 369-394. However, as the previous discussion of idea develops out of a sense on Levinas' part of the fatality and historical weight of being Jewish. Rather, it could be of *il y a* to this socio-political sense of oppression to reveal that the sense of absolute passivity lies in the inadequate socio-political oppression. The urgency of finding a way out of being becomes integrally tied with the question denouncing the most insipid forms of political oppression which aim at the very core of subjective identity. The philosophical concepts are derived from an essential pre-philosophical experience of being Jewish, but rather that for Levinas is worked out through an ongoing critical and philosophical engagement with the history of thought. Jewish essences to be adopted, but an identity to be created. As this thesis argues, it is precisely Levinas' intention to unc

moment it is suggested that in *Existence and Existents*, Levinas' account of *il y a* and the notion of hypostasis, which will be discussed below, attempts to demonstrate that there is a fundamental ambiguity or duality of effectivity, which reveals an insufficiency in the relation to being that the subject cannot ignore nor overcome.⁴⁶

Levinas begins with a reduction through which we find that *il y a* imposes itself when there is no longer anything - "when the world disappears".⁴⁷ However, this is as far as Levinas goes in his reduction. Recognising that he has already risked positing an indeterminate ground, which would already be a something, another approach must be taken. The importance of this first move is to separate the relation to being from the relation to the world, insofar as this world is a world of things ready and present to hand in which *Dasein* is always already immersed. This first move does not delineate, in its own fashion, the realm of authentic and inauthentic *Dasein*, but on the contrary, cancels the borders between the authentic and the inauthentic which are delineated by Heidegger and attempts to describe an alternative duality. Levinas describes a relation beyond the opposition authentic and inauthentic, one which is prior to any notion of *Dasein* as always already Being-in-the-world, or as that Being who has the comprehension of Being as its very mode of Being. Only now the "primary relationship *which binds us to Being* [] becomes palpable".⁴⁸

arise as a consequences of one's unavoidable engagement in the socio-political.

⁴⁶ To awaken to this duality is to be aware of a certain 'duplicity' of subjective identity as Levinas will attempt in Peperzak, *To the Other. An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1997). The relation of 'duality' and 'duplicity' occurs across the difference between *il y a* and the Other [*autrui*]. This relation remains a controversial interpretive issue. It will be a recurring theme of this thesis. 'Duplicity' it could be said, as Levinas, does not have negative moral connotations.

⁴⁷ EE 21/DE 26.

⁴⁸ EE 21/DE 26 (my italics).

For where the continual play of our relations with the world is interrupted we find neither death nor the "pure ego", but the anonymous state of being.⁴⁹

The notion of a relationship is misleading, says Levinas, since it implies terms or substantives. The relation to being on the other hand, is to be considered prior to any assumptions about either existence or existents. Levinas expresses this difficulty in [] as the impossibility of distinguishing that which accepts the weight from the weight itself. As we have seen, this problem arises because that which accepts the weight does not exist prior to the accepting. In *Existence and Existents* Levinas claims that that which accepts the weight first comes to be in this "incomparable event".⁵⁰ As Levinas suggests, he is not merely trying to imagine an act by which an existent takes over its existence; where something comes to be out of nothing, as this would already presuppose the duality of existence and existents as two "independent" terms. The meaning of this paradoxical duality is not to be sought in terms of a speculative reconstruction of its ground, but as suggested above is "attested to by certain moments in human existence".⁵¹ Thus, Levinas turns to a phenomenological analytic of the existent. While in [] Levinas arrives at the brutal fact that there is being [] and describes this encounter in terms of shame and nausea, in *Existence and Existents*, Levinas announces the horror of *il y a*, and introduces the notions of fatigue and indolence as the effective accomplishment of this encounter.⁵²

⁴⁹ EE 21/DE 26.

⁵⁰ EE 22/DE 26.

⁵¹ EE 22/DE 27.

⁵² The French terms are *fatigue* and *paresse*. As Llewelyn points out the translation of the latter by indolence expresses the more common signification of *paresse* as laziness, however, what the translation obscures is the aspect of its meaning which suggests a tendency "to cause delay". *Paresse*, Llewelyn suggests, comes from the Latin *differe*, meaning "to differ" or "to defer". Thus, Llewelyn suggests *paresse* points to the essential delay in the "beginning of the instant" and as we shall see, the instant as that which always lags behind itself. In other words, the instant as present,

Fatigue or weariness is described as the impossible refusal of an obligation to exist. Like a reminder of a commitment, one has to aspire and undertake to do something. But within this obligation there is a longing for evasion. Thus, in weariness we see a movement in which the "existent takes up its existence in the hesitation of a refusal".⁵³ This is not a conscious no, a decision taken by an already existing being, rather weariness *effects* a refusal: "The refusal is *in* weariness".⁵⁴ The difference between weariness and indolence is the essential inhibition that the latter effects. Indolence, Levinas claims, is the impossibility of beginning or the effecting of the beginning.⁵⁵ Indolence is a recoil before action before the inscription in being. It is an impotent, joyless aversion, in which a fear for the unknown "is a repugnance [] devolving from the aversion for the enterprise of existence".⁵⁶ Levinas emphasises that what is essential to indolence "is its place prior to a beginning of an action" which is a specific "way of being turned to a future".⁵⁷ It introduces a certain impossibility inherent in the beginning of every action. Indolence is turned to the future as a holding back from it. Beginning does not solicit the future, but "has already brought it about beforehand as a weary present".⁵⁸

Thus, at the end of his discussion of indolence, Levinas returns again to fatigue. Fatigue is now conceived of as a lagging behind the present. In effort and labour in which fatigue is essential, a being is "created" out of joint with itself. This lag in the present "opens a distance in which a relationship takes form".⁵⁹ The present is found to be constituted as lag and introduces a distance

never "is" as a pure presence. See Llewelyn, *The Genealogy of Ethics*, p. 37.

⁵³ EE 25/DE 32.

⁵⁴ EE 25/DE 32.

⁵⁵ EE 26/DE 33.

⁵⁶ EE 29/DE 39.

⁵⁷ EE 29/DE 39.

⁵⁸ EE 29/DE 40.

⁵⁹ EE 34/DE 49.

in existence. But this does not introduce a notion of lack or fear of loss. Levinas points to a concern that "is imposed by the solidity of a being that begins and is already encumbered with the excess of itself".⁶⁰ What does this amount to? It is a description of a certain duality of existence, bent and caught up in itself. It is not simply that one is, rather that one is oneself.⁶¹ How is this notion different to the Heideggerian notion of the tragic finitude of *Dasein*?

Nausea and indolence are not Levinasian interpretations of anxiety, which Levinas describes as the "comprehension of nothingness".⁶² As already suggested in the analyses of nausea above, Levinas introduces a notion of finitude that is defined in terms of an encumbrance with oneself that takes place before *Dasein's* encounter with death as the possibility of one's impossibility. In other words, the tragic finitude of an ecstasis toward the end, masks the tragic necessity of being oneself, of being inescapably attached to one's singular and finite being. Thus, Heideggerian *ecstasis* is transgressed by an impossibility which is not imposed as death, but as a burden which marks the limits of myself within the instant. This existent will have a relation to the world as hunger and thirst, and will not only be in the world alongside others and things. The burden of being oneself is the formal meaning of materiality or sub-stance.

iv) *Il y a* and the Duality of Hypostasis

The notion of the existent as interval, or as a duality which can be conceived as the institution of distance in existence, is an important element of Levinas' re-thinking of subjectivity, substantiality and materiality. Materiality, for Levinas, is not to be conceived mechanistically, biologically, or physically, as opposed to mind or thought. At this stage in his work, Levinas considers the

⁶⁰ EE 27/DE 36.

⁶¹ EE 28/DE 38.

⁶² EE 19/DE 20.

meaning of materiality in terms of the relationship to existence as the anonymous realm of *il y a*. *Il y a* is materiality in its elemental form: the "happening" of pure density or mass.⁶³ The materiality of the subject is to be understood in terms of its relation to this anonymous realm.

Levinas considers this relationship in terms of "hypostasis". He claims that in the history of philosophy the term describes the event "by which the act expressed by a verb became a being designated by a substantive".⁶⁴ For Levinas, hypostasis describes the specific manner of an existent's relation to *il y a*, where *il y a* is posited neither as the essence of the existent, nor as the condition of possibility of the existent.⁶⁵ Hypostasis describes a unique manner of the 'derivation' of identity. For Levinas, hypostasis refers both to the moment in which an instant occurs, but also points to a certain manner in which this instant occurs. The meaning of hypostasis is neither that which is the end product of a process of coming to be, nor that process, but incorporates the two, from the point of view of the instant itself. The meaning of hypostasis is not simply the coming to be, reification, or creation of a thing, but is essentially a doubling or folding back in oneself : a "*repli en soi*".⁶⁶ Levinas' hypostasis is the event of the instant which corresponds to the advent of the existent. Such an existent has, however, none of the characteristics of an entity. "Consciousness, position, the present, the 'I' [*je*]" are described by Levinas as "events by which the unnameable verb *to be* turns into substantives".⁶⁷ This is not only the apparition of a new grammatical category, but signifies the suspension of anonymity in the unique materiality of this instant.

Levinas uses the opposition of consciousness, and unconsciousness, as a way into the strange logic of hypostasis, suggesting that this opposition is itself

⁶³ EE 57/DE 91-92.

⁶⁴ EE 82/DE 140-141.

⁶⁵ EE 83/DE 141.

⁶⁶ EE 81/DE 138.

⁶⁷ EE 83/DE 142.

constituted by another relationship.⁶⁸ He describes consciousness as a mode of being which becomes fatigued and interrupts itself, tending towards the underlying depth of unconsciousness. However, Levinas suggests that this tendency toward unconsciousness, also points to the possibility of consciousness itself as an emergence out of unconsciousness. The relation of consciousness and unconsciousness effects an emergence in retreat: "a fainting away at the very focal point of its luminousness".⁶⁹ This fainting away is the production of position as a "scintillation".⁷⁰

Scintillation produces the body as matter, in terms of hypostasis. This is not a body object, nor a consciousness of localisation, but "the localisation of consciousness".⁷¹ This localisation does not presuppose a space or a thought behind it which grasps it as a "here". The moment of localisation is the "subjectivisation of the subject" as a "scintillation of consciousness".⁷² Levinas explains that localisation is a recess in the "plenum" of the *il y a*. This is not a happening *in the light*, but is the manner of the production of light.⁷³ In this way, Levinas uses the metaphor of scintillation in an attempt to describe a non-continuous event, but also to challenge the perceived reliance on a preconceived horizon of light in Heideggerian ontology.

Levinas attempts to describe the instant without relying on any preconceived notions of temporality or spatiality. With this notion of the scintillation of light, Levinas attempts to describe the manner of the "stance" in the instant. Light as scintillation, is the non-continuous event which at its greatest intensity disappears. Levinas also calls it "evanescence", a fading away.⁷⁴ The

⁶⁸ EE 67ff./DE 111-115ff.

⁶⁹ EE 68/DE 117.

⁷⁰ EE 68/DE 117.

⁷¹ EE 69/DE 118.

⁷² EE 69/DE 118.

⁷³ EE 69/DE 118.

⁷⁴ EE 72/DE 124.

notion of evanescence conceives of the moment of the positioning of subjectivity as an effectuation of an in-stance. This is a positioning which does not become position, place or body, but is the description of position, place or body, as a dynamic moment of beginning.⁷⁵ The body and consciousness, conceived in terms of evanescence and scintillation, are the primordial manner of contact with the earth and stand opposed to the Heideggerian analytic of Being-in-the-world.

The event of hypostasis is the effectuation of a subject which is a presence and which "masters existence". However the "evanescence" of the present means that this "mastery" is not one of domination. According to Levinas, evanescence is "the ransom paid for its [the present] subjectivity".⁷⁶ In other words, in becoming "I", in the mastery of the existent, the present has an absolute character but this is not absolute freedom or bliss. Mastery is absolute because it is engagement without reserve, an impossible evasion of the instant. However, this instant does not endure, it is a scintillation or evanescence in which nothing is kept for later. Mastery is an interval, terminus or stance which harbours another event and is does not describe the advent of a free being . The subject of hypostasis discovers it is not free, but alone responsible for the consummation of infinity in each instant. This is a Promethean fatality: it cannot be evaded despite a certain power being invested in the subject of hypostasis. In the hypostasis of an instant in which mastery is manifested the *il y a* returns, the "I" is bound to existence. What Levinas has attempted to show is that the present or instant is not "an expanse of immobilised time".⁷⁷ The present is an interruption, always breaking with the time of duration in which we grasp it.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ As Llewelyn writes, in hypostasis the stance of the existent is not 'static'. The stance is defined as th commencement, Llewelyn, *The Genealogy of Ethics*, p. 27.

⁷⁶ EE 73/DE 125.

⁷⁷ EE 73/DE 127.

⁷⁸ EE 73/DE 126.

The hypostasis signifies the suspension of the anonymity of *il y a*.⁷⁹ However, the particularity of the singular remains an "amphibological mutation from an event into an entity".⁸⁰ The identity of the "I" falls neither under the category of a thing nor an event, but is a relation between the two. This notion of the "I" as a relation or interval stands in contrast to the notion of *Dasein* as that which transcends itself. Rather than taking this ecstatic form, Levinas opposes a being, "whose very advent is a folding back upon itself" and in this particular sense is substance.⁸¹ Substantiality is conceived as a "singular reflexivity" - one is oneself, that is, enchained to the itself of this oneself. As Levinas suggests: "I am forever stuck with myself".⁸² This is a solitude out of which I cannot simply be shaken. The need of evasion, and the impossibility of escape in *De l'evasion* is now translated into:

... the impossible exigency for salvation which must concern the very instant of pain, and not only compensate for it.⁸³

v) Beyond Hope: Death, Time and *Autrui*

The hope for an order where the enchainment to oneself involved in the present would be broken still does not of itself have the force to effect what it hopes for.⁸⁴

As suggested above, a notion of freedom accompanies hypostasis. The way this freedom is interpreted is crucial to an understanding of subjectivity, and is tied up with hope and a new conception of time. But to introduce a notion of

⁷⁹ EE 83/DE 141.

⁸⁰ EE 79-80/DE 136.

⁸¹ EE 81/DE 138.

⁸² EE 84/DE 144.

⁸³ EE 91/DE 157.

⁸⁴ EE 89/DE 153.

freedom in the midst of enchainment will sound paradoxical unless we recognise from the start that this freedom is not a power of the subject to leave, negate or overcome being, but merely to bear it. This leads Levinas to suggest that the "freedom" accompanying hypostasis is merely a conception or hope of freedom not freedom itself. Nevertheless, as a thought, it:

... knocks on the closed doors of another dimension; it has a presentiment of a mode of existence where nothing is definitive [], the contrary of the definitive [] subjectivity of the "I". And this is the order of time.⁸⁵

As we have seen, with the notion of hypostasis Levinas attempts to think the instant without presupposing time as a linear progression, or as duration. In addition to this, the instant, or hypostasis now describes the manner of the relation of being, conceived as *il y a*, and subjectivity. This relation takes place before time. Levinas claims that it comes to the time of duration "out of itself".⁸⁶ The introduction of time as neither the structure of subjectivity, or the exterior world, but as the "unravelling of the knot [] which is tied in it [the present], the definitive, which its evanescence does not undo", signifies that we cannot find in the subject the means for its salvation.⁸⁷ The exigency does not find itself negated, but introduces a notion of desire which Levinas will attempt to show accompanies every metaphysics. The introduction of temporality introduces a hitherto hidden exigency - a desire to recommence as other, an impossibility that comes face to face with the other. Thus, Levinas links the need of evasion, conceived as an exigency to leave being, with a notion of a desire for a beyond which is already a desire for an other and not just an escape from one's

⁸⁵ EE 89/DE 152 (translation modified).

⁸⁶ EE 73/DE 126.

⁸⁷ EE 93/DE 159.

attachment to being. Levinas introduces this desire as linked to a specific notion of temporality:

We think ... that time does not convey the insufficiency of the relationship with Being [] which is effected in the present, but that it is called for to provide a remedy for the excess of the definitive contact which the instant effects.⁸⁸

The realm in which nothing is definitive differs fundamentally from Heideggerian nothingness. In *Time and the Other*, Levinas directly contrasts his analysis of solitude in pain, need and work, with Heideggerian anxiety of nothingness. Suffering is described here as in *De l'evasion* as the "impossibility of fleeing or retreating".⁸⁹ For Levinas, as suggested earlier, this is tantamount to "the impossibility of nothingness".⁹⁰ Suffering as enchainment is a call to the impossibility of nothingness, in other words an impossibility in the existent's relation to its own death:

... as if we were on the verge of an event beyond what is revealed to the end in suffering.⁹¹

Death, is not given as nothingness, but as the impossibility of nothingness. It announces itself as an "experience of passivity", acknowledging that "experience" is "only a way of speaking".⁹² For Levinas, in being-toward-death there is an assumption of utter most possibility, an event of freedom and authenticity. However, Levinas is attempting to describe a situation in which we are seized

⁸⁸ EE 85-6/DE 147.

⁸⁹ TO 69/TA 163

⁹⁰ TO 69/TA 164.

⁹¹ TO 69/TA 163.

⁹² TO 70/TA 164.

"rendering every assumption of possibility impossible".⁹³ For Levinas, solitude is not affirmed by death, but broken by it. We are in relation with something that is absolutely other. An event happens that we no longer assume: in which we are no longer able to be able.⁹⁴ It is only for the subject that has reached suffering, and through it death, that a relationship with transcendence can be conceived.

Death is not my death, but introduces an abyss between the event and the subject. This does not destroy the subjectivity of the subject but introduces a relation of a "facing up to" an event that is otherwise than the welcoming of a thing or object. In *Existence and Existents*, Levinas explains that death, conceived in this way, is the condition for a new birth. What he discovers in the relation to death is that the "I", as an instant, does not return identical to itself, or circulate identically in time, but is a "ferment of time".⁹⁵ There is a "miraculous fecundity in the instant" by which it recommences as other.⁹⁶ But it cannot endow itself with this "alterity".⁹⁷ It is the relation to *autrui* - the other person - which constitutes time as both exterior to the definitive instant of hypostasis and something other than an object of contemplation. The relation of death, fecundity and alterity changes throughout Levinas' work, and the signification of each alters as a consequence. In other words, it is important to recognise that death, fecundity, and as shall be seen, *eros* and the face, are not synonyms for the relation to the other person, but reflect Levinas' developing and changing approach to the question of how to think "alterity".

In *Existence and Existents*, Levinas introduces the other person, not merely as someone hoped for in the height of despair and nausea, but as restoring hope in the midst of despair. However, the precise causes and consequences of

⁹³ TO 71/TA 166.

⁹⁴ TO 74/TA 170.

⁹⁵ EE 92/DE 158.

⁹⁶ EE 93/DE 159.

⁹⁷ EE 93/DE 159.

this miraculous fecundity remain unclear. The encounter with the other person appears to release the subject from the "responsibility" and freedom to bear the full weight of existence. Thus, it might seem that Levinas has focused too much on the salvation of subjectivity and in the process given back to it a power over its being, making the other person merely the condition of possibility of self-transcendence. There is a sense in which the relation to the other person, which is described in *Time and the Other* and *Existence and Existents* in terms of *eros*, could be interpreted as describing the conditions of possibility for "power" and "violence". The question of how to think subjectivity in relation to the other, without reducing the other to a functionary of an otherwise powerless subject, underlies Levinas' later thought.

The signification of *eros* in these early works, and the move away from the erotic in the later works, reflect a concern for the manner in which the relation to alterity and is effected within the social totality.⁹⁸ The issue, for Levinas in *Existence and Existents*, is how to introduce an event in which the definitive solitude of the subject is transcended without *negating* the "freedom" of the "I".⁹⁹ If his ultimate concern is the possibility of transcendence we might wonder why Levinas insists on the necessity of maintaining a place for the "I". However, as already suggested the necessity of this place is to assure freedom for responsibility, rather than freedom for the individual subject.¹⁰⁰ In *Time and the Other* and *Existence and Existents* the search for a new way of leaving being becomes a concern to describe a mode of transcendence that does not negate the necessity of responsibility, but rather, locates its originary signification in the relation to the other person.

Hypostasis delivers the "I" from anonymity and introduces it to a world of its own. In this world the subject is master and remains at a distance with regard

⁹⁸ To be discussed in Chapter Five

⁹⁹ EE 88-89/DE 151-152.

¹⁰⁰ EE 87/DE 150.

to itself. However, mastery is merely the fact of its being a base, that is not a place of security, but suffering. Levinas ultimately intends a freedom of responsibility. He does not want to give up either the absolute subjectivity of the subject, nor the possibility of objectivity or universality. Ontological though it may be, Levinas' account of this "species of duality" is not a mere repetition of Heidegger who mistakenly conceives of transcendence as an ecstasy that is "only possible as an ecstasy *toward the end*" in which *Dasein* recovers its ownmost Being.¹⁰¹ For Levinas, subjective transcendence remains essentially impossible.

The analyses of *De l'evasion* introduce the notion of impossibility as well as situating this impossibility in the midst of the relation of Being and *Dasein*. The idea of the relation of Being and *Dasein* governed by a fundamental impossibility is taken up by Levinas in his later work *Existence and Existents* and *Time and the Other*. The notion that there is an impossibility does not lead Levinas to the Heideggerian starting point of *Dasein* as that Being that has at the very least a pre-ontological understanding of Being, but only begs the question of the Heideggerian project. For Levinas, the impossibility of distinguishing the one from the other should not lead to the conclusion that there is not a distinction, but rather that the distinction is the consequence of a certain 'impossible' event.

In *Existence and Existents*, there is a suggestion that the ontological difference as Heidegger conceives it, is an effect of an event that 'precedes' it: the "instant" as a "relationship" with existence which precedes any relationship with the world:

The event which we have been inquiring after is antecedent to that placing [in the world].

It concerns the meaning of the very fact that in Being [] there are beings.¹⁰²

101 EE 19/DE 20.

102 EE 101/DE 174.

An interpretation of the meaning of the antecedence cannot overlook Levinas' claims concerning the paradox of being and the problem of origins both in *Being and Subject* and *Existence and Existents*. For Levinas, the significance of the ontological difference must itself be rescued from meaninglessness through the irruption of the other person - *autrui*. The meaning of ontological difference itself has its "origin" outside that difference in the realm of ontological impossibility which Levinas will call the "ethical".