



Heidegger and Levinas: Metaphysics, Ontology and the Horizon of the Other

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Abstract

Already in his earlier works Levinas proposes a distinct phenomenological project which takes into consideration the radicality of the other and otherness by questioning intentionality and the validity of intersubjectivity within intentional consciousness. His move “towards Heidegger and against Husserl” was due primarily to Heidegger’s *Dasein* analysis, understanding of *Being* and *being-with*. However, in his major work, *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas proposes a new perspective on reading intersubjective relations with the *Other* which strongly contrasts with the Heideggerian concept of intersubjectivity. This paper addresses the question of the *Other*, intersubjectivity and ethics in the writings of Levinas and Heidegger respectively. It considers Levinas’s critique of intersubjectivity as provoked and developed by Heidegger’s analytic of *Dasein*, and concentrates on Levinas’s specific understanding of intentionality in his account of metaphysics, metaphysical desire and the *Other*. It also takes up the question of temporality as a necessary condition for intersubjective relation and explores its implication for the self and the *Other* in Levinas’s and Heidegger’s respective philosophies.

The main questions for both Levinas and Heidegger are the meaning of being, the mode of its presentation, and how we, as historical temporal beings, can understand this phenomenon (Levinas, 1985, p. 38). Heidegger takes account of the facticity of being through a peculiar shift towards an analysis of human being as what he calls *Dasein*. A particular characteristic of *Dasein* is its situatedness in time and space. Situatedness is revealed as an inescapable condition that makes it possible for the truth of being to be disclosed. Being is experienced from within *Dasein*’s understanding of it (Heidegger, 1927/1995, pp. 32-33). Thus, the understanding of being is a main feature of *Dasein*.

The importance of Heidegger’s philosophy within Levinas’s problematic of ethics can be described as follows: the understanding of being is constituted by

the fact that it is already engaged in time and history, without recourse to the absolute self or the freedom bestowed by the phenomenological reduction. The ethical significance this was to assume for Levinas is pointed to in “The Work of Husserl” (1940):

For Heidegger this existence certainly has a meaning – and by affirming the meaning of existence, which does not have for him the opaqueness of a brute fact, Heidegger remains a phenomenologist – but this meaning no longer has the structure of a noema. The subject is neither free nor absolute; [he] is no longer entirely answerable for [him]self. [He] is dominated and overwhelmed by history, by [his] origins, about which [he] can do nothing, since he is thrown into the world and his

abandonment marks all [his] projects and powers. (Levinas, 1940/1998a, p. 84)

What Levinas finds in Heidegger's philosophy is that ontology and phenomenology are not opposed to each other. Heidegger is concerned with two tasks: fundamental ontology and the description of experience. Levinas writes that Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* (1927) "aims at describing man's being or existing – not his nature" (Levinas, 1985, p. 40). The critical claim here is that Heidegger's philosophy is directed mainly towards the explanation of the relation between being and beings.

In contrast to Heidegger, Levinas seeks for the possibility of disclosing the relation to the Other which could exceed the question of being and move to the question of the nature of subjectivity and its relation to the true Other. Does the search for the meaning of being miss something which may be even more fundamental? His critical approach leads to his revising of the European tradition of philosophical thinking.

In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas furthermore espouses the notion that the history of European philosophy represents a history of violence towards the Other insofar as alterity was always reduced to the same, in the sense of cognition intending to subsume the other into the sphere of absolute knowledge (Levinas, 1961/2004, pp. 24-25). The relation between the classical paradigm and Levinas's philosophical tradition is partly analyzed in Derrida's essay "Violence and Metaphysics" (1967/1981). Derrida states that the specificity of Levinas's thought can be explained by his desire to liberate thinking from the domination of the same and the self:

the thought which ... seeks to liberate itself from the Greek domination of the Same and the One ... as if from oppression itself – an oppression certainly comparable to none other in the world, an ontological or transcendental oppression, but also the origin or alibi of all oppression in the world. A thought, finally, which seeks to liberate itself from a philosophy ... which "is fixed in the concept of totality which dominates Western philosophy". (Derrida, 1967/1981, p. 83)

For Levinas, the charge lies not only in the transformation of ontology into ethical metaphysics, but, more specifically, in revising the notion of intentionality through the concept of metaphysical desire. His own understanding of ethics arises from this new concept of intentionality.

From Levinas's point of view, however, the idea of

metaphysics is to aim at the other and alterity as a source of transcendence (Levinas, 1974/1981, p.120). Levinas's project is not about destruction of the traditional concept of metaphysics, but an attempt to keep its positive meaning. Already the title of his provocative work *Totality and Infinity* announces the desire for changes. It marks the final stage of metaphysics, or the so-called final form in which it reaches itself. I would argue that the possibility of such a transformation is rooted in the reconsideration of the notion of intentionality that occurs through Levinas's concept of metaphysical desire.

According to Levinas, metaphysical desire differs in nature from need (Levinas, 1961/2004, p. 117). It is a distinction to which the tradition of European philosophy has been inattentive. When the subject experiences need, the relation between the I and its need can be described in terms of a lack. In need, such as hunger, that which confronts me as other (food, for example) becomes a part of me (Levinas, 1961/2004, pp. 33-34). As Levinas puts it, "their alterity is therefore reabsorbed into my own identity" (Levinas, 1961/2004, p. 33). To need something is thus to relate to something outside myself in such a way as to negate its alterity.

In *Totality and Infinity*, metaphysical desire is presented as a desire for absolute alterity; it is a movement to exteriority and otherness (Levinas, 1961/2004, p. 82). As Levinas elucidates, "desire does not coincide with an unsatisfied need; it is situated beyond satisfaction and nonsatisfaction" (Levinas, 1961/2004, p. 179). This desire is the form of man's transcendental relation to the Other. It differs from ordinary desire as the task which is to be satisfied, in which case the desirable is "bread I eat, the land in which I dwell, the landscape I contemplate" (Levinas, 1961/2004, p. 33). In contrast, metaphysical desire "tends toward *something else entirely*, toward the *absolutely other*" (Levinas, 1961/2004, p. 33).

Contrary to Peperzak's position, I would agree with Drabinski (2001, pp. 110) that desire does not link itself with the specific figure of the human face (Peperzak, 1993, p. 68), with my interpretation of metaphysical desire supporting Drabinski's reading of it (Drabinski, 2001, pp. 110-111). Accordingly, I maintain, along with Drabinski, that "the movement of metaphysical desire manifests a mode of relationality where subjectivity is no longer bound to itself This decentred I is capable of transcending ... the economy of representation". I further maintain along with Drabinski that in metaphysical desire subjectivity opens up towards exteriority, infinity and otherness in general, but not towards the particular Other specified as a human being. What Drabinski discovers in the notion of metaphysical desire is thus

a specific logic of desire that “aims at the alterity of the absolutely other, aims at describing a concrete relation of transcendence as such – transcendence without the specificity of the human other” (Drabinski, 2001, p. 111).

In the concept of metaphysical desire, Levinas tries to retain the structure of intentionality to which Husserl gave primacy. However, in moving toward the absolutely other, metaphysical Desire does not return to the egoistic life as its animating origin. The desire is a supra-ontological transcendence towards the Other: “a passivity, or passion, in which Desire is recognized, in which the ‘*more* in the *less*’ awakens with its most ardent, most noble, and most ancient flame, a thought to think more than it can think” (Levinas, 1982/1994, p. 67). Husserl’s failure is, according to Levinas, to assume the adequacy of the intending to the intended, an assumption that traduces alterity by interiorizing the Other. For Levinas, the underlying structure of intentionality presupposes an intention in which the intended goes beyond intention. This intention is metaphysical desire. Levinas writes: “desire has another intention; it desires beyond everything that can simply complete it” (Levinas, 1961/2004, pp. 34-35).

Metaphysical desire is deeply rooted in the structure of intentionality. Thus far, it is dissatisfied, since consciousness is always consciousness of (in its essence intentionality). The positive side of this being dissatisfied is the possibility of the exteriority of consciousness. Desire allows consciousness to intend the Other without reducing it or comprehending it. Comprehension would be a satisfaction of the desirable; as such, it is bound up with the ordinary wish. The metaphysical desire resists the integration of the other into the sphere of consciousness, it is always exterior, and thus it breaks with the philosophy of identity. This brings me to the most decisive point: the movement of Desire does not derive the Other from the constitutional work of the Same, but, following Drabinski’s interpretation, keeps the radical difference which is carried by the very movement of Desire and only deepens transcendence as such (Drabinski, 2001, p. 112). It is exactly here that I approach the Levinasian definition of metaphysics: as the movement towards transcendental being. Due to metaphysical desire, metaphysics itself applies a conceptual distance between the other and consciousness. Being, beings and exteriority, and, consequently, transcendence, are already included in metaphysics. Thus, being directed towards being as such is being aimed at alterity and at transcendence.

Levinas’s criticism of Western philosophy is now clarified: for a long time the tradition of philosophical thinking has hidden the true essence of metaphysics, that is, the desire for alterity.

There are two reasons for this oblivion of metaphysics. The absolute other was thought in a negative way, and the understanding of being was the key moment of the thinking being. Metaphysics is interpreted differently in Levinas’s philosophy, which views the task of metaphysics as being to intend towards the other and alterity: “philosophy presents itself as a realization of being. In this work [*Totality and Infinity*] metaphysics has an entirely different meaning. If its movement leads to transcendence as such, transcendence means not appropriation of *what is*, but its respect” (Levinas, 1961/2004, p. 302). The natural completion of metaphysics is ethics, since only in the ethical relation is the Other presented to consciousness in all its irreducible otherness (Levinas, 1961/2004, p. 300). Levinas does not deny the tradition of metaphysical thinking, but gives it a new dimension. In other words, to understand being means to find the possibility of an ethical relation with the Other.

The concept of metaphysical desire, being the key notion for Levinas’s interpretation of metaphysics, is, at the same time, an attempt to renew an understanding of intentionality and to reveal the possibility of the Other for intentional consciousness. Heidegger, however, not only also proposed a new dimension of intentionality and phenomenology, but was one of the first philosophers to undertake the attempt of criticizing the tradition of metaphysical thinking. Yet, despite the great influence of Heidegger, the philosophical project of Levinas is different.

According to Heidegger, the metaphysical tradition was not able to approach the question of the essence of being, since its attention was directed to beings (existents) (Heidegger, 1927/1995, pp. 28-31, 32-35). Each region of ontic thought assumes the understanding of being, a certain ontology that defines the being that it studies. Heidegger proposed the project of fundamental ontology in order to discover the sense of being in general – something that is presupposed in every ontic science. To realize this task, Heidegger starts from an altogether different point of reflection.

Fundamental ontology can be accomplished by considering a particular being before it is defined by scientific study. This being, as pointed out earlier, is *Dasein*. It represents what we are before our being is considered within any scientific tradition. What needs to be noted is that, according to Heidegger, *Dasein* is the continuous presence of being in every concrete situation of human life. Man is the only being that is capable of comprehending its being. It is only for man that being has its continuous actuality. *Dasein* is described as the *topos* of being’s actualisation in the world of being (of existents). However, *Dasein* is not identical with the empirical I. Nonetheless, Heidegger

indeed brings the I within the sphere of *Dasein*. Being-in-the-world has three unfolding aspects: being-one's-Self (Heidegger, 1927/1995, p. 163), "being-in" and "world". Being-in corresponds to the "there" and is indicated by thrownness, and the world itself is bounded by thrownness.

What is the meaning of the self (Ich-selbst)? The self can be interpreted as my own *Dasein* project and as a possibility and a basis for questioning. *Dasein* is the *topos* of understanding being as such (Heidegger, 1927/1995, pp. 182-186). It is the presence of the objective sense of being in the space of men, where being is opened towards the being. Being is uninterruptedly actualized and reproduced in the existential facticity of *Dasein* that, in its turn, goes beyond itself, reflecting by this act the openness of being in itself. Thus, according to Heidegger, *Dasein* is a being that understands its being in the sense that it is always correlated with its being. It is a ground for realization in the project of fundamental ontology. To confirm this, we can adduce two proofs. Firstly, *Dasein* is the essence that is capable of asking about its being; it is its very modus of existence. Secondly, the main characteristic of *Dasein* is being-in-the-world. With this we have achieved a preliminary conception of the analytic of *Dasein*.

I should note here that Heidegger does not really ignore the other, but, by introducing *Dasein*, he promotes the self which subjects the other to the question of being. To put it differently, Heidegger indeed speaks about the other as the "other-side" of that authentic Being which *Dasein* already is (Heidegger, 1927/1995, p. 328). It can thus be concluded that, for Levinas, the meaning of the new philosophy (philosophy after phenomenology and after metaphysics) is to find the way to transcendence through ethics, whereas for Heidegger the new philosophical project is the analytic of *Dasein*'s facticity, its main modus of existence, the ability to question, and being-in-the-world (Taminiaux, 1989/1991, p. 40). In a narrower sense, *Being and Time* implies research on the theme of the being of the being, while the other being is simply human being caught within the concept of being-in-the-world. Here, the understanding of being implies two moments. Firstly, it is questioning about being, and, secondly, it is *Dasein* that exists on its own (Heidegger, 1925/1992, p. 115). This thesis Levinas cannot accept. The way the question of being is articulated allows for a sort of incursion into the sphere of otherness.

This questioning has two sides: it is an understanding that happens in advance, and it is its interpretation which probes the original structures of understanding. Being is opened for understanding in such a way that, for further consideration, we should interpret this

everyday comprehension of being. Being a certain movement, the interpretation is not a transition to something which is different, but a discovering of existence as it is. It is the becoming of existence. In other words, the interpretation is the self-becoming of the comprehension of being. In this case, the question about being is existence in the framework of what is already understood. According to Heidegger, these two sides of the questioning can be explained by three components which fulfil it. These are: what is asked, what should be revealed in the process of questioning, and toward what it is directed. The first element is being that is disclosed in the understanding. The second element is the sense of being which is the thematizing of the understanding. The goal of interpretation is to realize the movement from comprehension of being to its sense. We can also say that, in the questioning, we move from what we ask to what is asked and then to who asks. First, the being is asked about its being. In this case we ask about the attitude to being. It is not a question about who asks, but about an attitude to being. Such a development in the question designates exactly the comprehension of being. The next step is to make clear how the interpretation of the received sense comes forth. Indeed, our understanding of any sense is formed by interpretation. What needs to be remembered is that being meets the being only on the way towards the comprehension of being. Since the very moment when the being is in a certain space – thanks to which the aiming at being is possible – the question about being is no longer aimed at the single being.

How do the being and being meet each other inside existence, in *Dasein*? In the methodological construction of transcendental phenomenology, the constitution of the alter ego rests on the constitution of the thing-world. We find the same in *Being and Time*: analysis of the ready-to-hand and the present-to-hand methodologically precedes the analysis of *Dasein*-with and the with-world.

What is important in Levinas's disagreement with Heidegger's position is that *Dasein* meets the being as a sort of instrument *It* uses in life (Heidegger, 1927/1995, pp. 406-407). This being, discovered by *Dasein*, exists only in relation to totality, of which this being becomes a part. For *Dasein*, to meet the being does not mean to put the world aside, but to be involved in the world and to use it. However, Theunissen stresses a few similarities in Heidegger's and Husserl's reading of the Other (Theunissen, 1965/1984, p. 181). Firstly, Husserl sees the Other as a subject for the world which is more original than the world. Secondly, the Other is objective being within the world. In *Being and Time*, being-in-the-world and inner-world beings rest on being-in-the-world where the Other is in the world with me.

To allow the being to be involved in the world creates the condition on the basis of which *Dasein* meets the being in its being. This thesis states that, before *Dasein* has met the being, the world has been disclosed. Heidegger does not try to show a specific form of the intersubjective relation; his intention is to show a conceptual attitude towards the world (Heidegger, 1927/1995, §§ 55, 56, 57). The world does not represent any being or community of beings, but is the special context of relations and a unity of different possibilities of participation in it. This world context in which the being can be met Heidegger names significance (Heidegger, 1927/1995, p. 120). Since *Dasein* understands the world by its referents, it is a source of significance. In such a world the being has a meaning to the extent that it is signified by *Dasein*, which already is a special context of understanding (Heidegger, 1927/1995, pp. 118-119). Thus, on its own, the being does not have any meaning and is not a source of meaning. Meaning is a product formed by *Dasein*.

Moreover, I should add that *Dasein* understands the world within its temporal structure. Heidegger claims that time is the horizon for all understanding of being and for interpreting it (Heidegger, 1927/1995, pp. 351, 352). We need to explicate time as the horizon for the understanding of being in terms of temporality, as the being of *Dasein*. Heidegger holds that this projection presupposes a temporal openness or clearing of being itself. In other words, the temporality of *Dasein* mirrors the temporality of being. Since we can discover in the temporality of *Dasein* only the mirror image of the temporality of being, being as such remains concealed. In general, for Heidegger, temporality is the condition of being, and time is the site where the drama of the comprehension of being by *Dasein* takes place. Levinas writes: "the fundamental relation with being, in Heidegger, is not the relationship with the Other, but with death, where everything that is non-authentic in the relationship with the Other is denounced, since one dies alone" (Levinas, 1985, p. 58). Levinas's argument here is that *Dasein* exists only in dialogue with being. The fundamental encounter for the existent is not with other beings, but with being itself. Here, temporality is a condition of encounter, but, according to Levinas, it does not represent the possibility of a radical transformation of *Dasein* after its understanding of being. Levinas's own view on this point is that time should be understood as the condition of encounter with the Other:

Relationship with the future, the presence of the future in the present, seems all the same accomplished in the face-to-face with the Other. The situation of the face-to-face would be the very accomplishment of time. (Levinas, 1979/1985a, p. 77)

The main thesis by Levinas in *Time and the Other* is that the attempt to think of time is "a relation which does not allow itself to be assimilated by experience; or to that which – of itself infinite – would allow itself to be comprehended" (Levinas, 1979/1985a, p. 32). Does Heidegger link temporality with ethics?

In response to Levinas, Lingis in *Deathbound Subjectivity* emphasizes that the sense of conscience and the sense of morality are anticipatory; that is, conscience calls me unto being, I have to become. To put it differently, conscience anticipates the limits of the possible, the possibility of impossibility: "Once one has anticipated one's death one has anticipated what is possible, all that is possible" (Lingis, 1989, p. 113). For Heidegger, as Lingis shows, the sense of the possible and the sense of the ethical are the same thing; moreover, they are the veritable sense of the future. Lingis proceeds to situate morality within the moment of the present. The sense of morality is to be found in the vertical dimension of immanence. It is what we absolutely could not get a hold on (Lingis, 1989, p. 114). However, Heidegger places focus on the future. He identifies the original and veritable sense of the future with the sense of the possible (Heidegger, 1927/1995, p. 286). To grasp the sense of the future is to have a sense of the possible – that is, not what we represent to ourselves by prolonging the lines of the actual, but what comes of itself (Heidegger, 1927/1995, p. 291). A specific kind of future which can be bound to the Levinasian understanding is distinguished by Lingis: The future is what comes to us, and not what we produce. In Levinas's reading, the future comes from the Other. For Heidegger, it is not that we have a sense of our death in the future, but that we have a sense of the future in our sense of death. To clarify this thesis, Lingis adds: "we anticipate a sense of our future in that dimension of immanence upon which our moral anxiety opens" (Lingis, 1989, p. 114).

Yet, for Levinas, Heidegger is a philosopher who turned phenomenology from absolute pure consciousness towards everyday life and introduced *Dasein* as a being with others. In other words, the being of *Dasein* must be understood as a being with others (Heidegger, 1927/1995, p. 219). Thus, being is qualified by the Heideggerian notion *mitsein*, being with. Heidegger's position seems very attractive to Levinas, because *Dasein*, by virtue of existing in an intersubjective space with others, is not, as in Husserl's notion of intersubjectivity, conceived as a reflection of my consciousness.

However, Heidegger's ontological project reveals that he is interested in modes of being rather than in empirical encounters. The empirical presence or absence of others can be ontically important (important to us as individuals), but it is absolutely

meaningless from an ontological point of view: "Being-with is an existential characteristic of *Dasein* even when factually no Other is present-at-hand or perceived. Even *Dasein*'s being alone is being-with in the world. The Other can be missing only in and for a being-with. Being-alone is a deficient mode of being-with; its very possibility is the proof of this" (Heidegger, 1927/1995, p. 156).

Being-with others is not, thus, an encounter with the Other in the everyday sense. It characterizes the relationship of *Dasein* with being, but not of beings with one another (Heidegger, 1927/1995, p. 157). Levinas claims that being-with-others discloses the solitariness of *Dasein*. Also, it is not clear if the encounter with the Other is entailed by the notion of being-with. The intersubjective world as a community and sociality is part of the relation of *Dasein* to being, rather than a relation with something totally other. That is why *Dasein* remains solitary. On this account Levinas writes: "Just as in all the philosophies of communion, sociality in Heidegger is found in the subject alone; and it is in terms of solitude that the analysis of *Dasein* in its authentic form is pursued" (Levinas, 1979/1985a, p. 93).

"Being-with" and "towards the Other" are rooted deeply in *Dasein*'s structure. Being with, which is terminologically identical to being with the Other as well as to *Dasein*-with, is supposed to be already given with the being-in-the-world of *Dasein*. Heidegger (1927/1995) clarifies that the question of being-with "leads to structures of *Dasein* that are equiprimordial with Being-in-the-world: Being-with and *Dasein*-with (*Mitdasein*)" (p. 149). Following Heidegger's intention, being-in-the-world is just as original as being-with, and, what is more, the being-in-the-world of *Dasein* is constituted through being-with. To put it differently, being-with is a constitutive moment of what is in itself being-in-the-world.

Theunissen stresses that being-with is disclosed through "caring for", which should be interpreted as the being-with of being with Others. What differs in Heidegger's theory from that of Husserl is that the I is never given with the Other. Accordingly, Theunissen recognizes that "only those who cut the I off the Other must latch onto 'empathy' as that act that is supposed to instate the initially absent bond between the I and the Other" (Theunissen, 1965/1984, p. 175). The focus is placed on the connection between social ontology and *Dasein* theory. Specifically, Theunissen suggests that, when the Other is not found, the I still exists as being-with. Actually, it demonstrates that being-with has little to do with the coming together of subjects and is instead merely another modification of being alone. Heidegger's contribution to the theory of intersubjectivity consists in bringing it to another plane – in particular, the existential.

Now Levinas's critique of *Dasein* takes a distinct shape. An entire encounter with the Other takes place within the world and is subjected to *Dasein*'s own projection. As Theunissen has pointed out, the Other can only be encountered within the world. The ontological meaning is constituted in the total structure of *Dasein* where the Other has to be aligned with the self or with me. Theunissen insists on the impossibility of distinguishing the Other as radical otherness (Theunissen, 1965/1984, pp. 175-177). In Heidegger's view, it is always my relation to the Other, in that the Other remains one of the inner-world entities and is grasped in my world project – and thus not, as Husserl showed in his theory of intersubjectivity, as the relation of the Other to me.

According to Levinas, in Heidegger's analytic of *Dasein* the other and the being can be revealed only within a grasping and comprehending horizon which evaluates only the same (Levinas, 1961/2004, p. 45). The understanding of being affirms the priority of being over the being. It subjects the relations with the other to the being of the being which is to master the other: "in subordinating every relation with existents to the relation with Being the Heideggerian ontology affirms the primacy of freedom over ethics. ... freedom comes from an obedience to Being" (Levinas, 1961/2004, p. 45). The understanding of being still is the thinking of the same, since the same understands first of all neutral and anonymous being. I never meet absolute alterity, because the existent as such is only with respect to the universality of being. The existent which is approached by virtue of the openness of being, is never fully existent, but is the existent within the context of the world or within the horizon of being. For the understanding being, the existent has to reveal itself by emanating itself. However, the existent appears within the world context. Since *Dasein* is always directed to the anonymity and neutrality of being, it is never in the situation of total surprise when encountering some phenomenon. *Dasein* is incapable of meeting an existent that is totally alien to it. The neutrality of being excludes entirely the difference that separates the same and the other. But the ethical encounter of self and Other cannot be explained by the ontic-ontological difference between existent and Being. Thus, Levinas finds himself faced with the necessity of taking into consideration two philosophical approaches: Husserl's philosophy of transcendental consciousness on the one hand, and, on the other, Heidegger's project of fundamental ontology.

At this point, it can be stated, in brief, that Heidegger and Levinas propose two different projects for the phenomenological inquiry into subjectivity. Whereas the main idea of the Heideggerian fundamental ontology is the questioning of being, that is, of the "to be", Levinas intends to put metaphysics on the ground

of ethics by questioning responsible subjectivity.

I have attempted to trace Heidegger's place in Levinas's project of ethics. However, one could ask if Heidegger has articulated the ethical within his philosophy of *Dasein*. As is well known, Heidegger wrote nothing specifically devoted to the question of ethics. On the contrary, his work is widely reputed to be rich in ontological speculation but entirely unhelpful regarding moral conduct or social equity. In his "Letter on Humanism", ethics, or the demand to formulate an ethical theory, is specifically subordinated to the question of being. Much in the early Heidegger has seemed promising for an investigation of ethics. But there is also a good deal of suspicion about the ethical possibilities in Heidegger. I would like to attempt some reflections on ethics and ontology. But where to put the point of articulation between ethics and ontology? As Tugendhat puts it, to clear up the sense of Being one should ask about the sense of human life – its aim and its end (Tugendhat, 1979/1995, p. 139). This question of Being is taken as a hermeneutical question of life's facticity which is exactly at issue. In this sense, ethics is considered to be a discursive system through which philosophy tends to accomplish truth.

From the very first lines, "Letter on Humanism" presents a deep reflection on action. The question of humanism is developed as a clarification of the truth through an understanding of man acting and conducting himself. Besides the crucial issue of tracing the genesis of Heidegger's *Dasein* theory, there is also an entire rethinking of ethics. Heidegger's interpretation or attitude to the reading of ethics is similar in approach to his approach to logos and physics. Heidegger's central point here is that, before scholars started the demarcation of philosophy into ethics, logic and physics, ancient thinkers did not know ethics as a separate region of inquiry. However, this does not indicate the unethical in their thinking; on the contrary, Heidegger claims, the tragedies of Sophocles and the sayings of Heraclitus had informed and debated the original question of ethos before Aristotle introduced his *Ethics*. Heidegger applies the Aristotelian sense of ethics, which is *episteme ethike* – science of ethos – and this ethos needs to be thought of as "abode" (Heidegger, 1947/1993, p. 256). In "Letter on Humanism", Heidegger unfolds ethos as what can be called an abode, a dwelling place. The abode is the "there" in that it is open. Nancy makes an interesting remark that the abode is "thus as much a conduct [as] a residence (or rather, 'residing' is above all a conduct, the conduct of Being-the-there)" (Nancy, 1996/2002, p. 67). The fundamental meaning of ethics is thought of in terms of the abode of man: it is a familiar and everyday place where the human being dwells and comes to stand out, to ek-sist, and to ask about the truth of Being. For Heidegger, originary

ethics is human dwelling thought upon the horizon of the truth of Being.

The difficult issue in Heidegger's ethics is taken up in Nancy's article on "Heidegger's 'Originary Ethics'". Acting man does not point to a specific aspect of being, but, as Nancy explains, it is his very Being itself, and thus it discloses an ethics as the thinking of being. In its conducting, *Dasein* brings into play the very meaning of Being. As Heidegger clarifies in *Sein und Zeit*, *Dasein* is the being for which "in its very Being, that Being is at issue for it" (Heidegger, 1927/1995, p. 12). The turning point in the thought of Heidegger's ethics is that *Dasein*, while being opened, is called to an essential and active relation with the proper fact of Being. Nancy draws attention to the ethical character of this relation and that of sense: "in *Dasein*, it is a case of giving sense to the fact of Being – or, more exactly, in *Dasein* the fact of Being is making sense" (Nancy, 1996/2002, p. 71). "Making sense" is precisely acting and conducting oneself, and it is essentially thinking. Thus, as Nancy points out, the essential act of ethical action is thinking (Nancy, 1996/2002, pp. 71-78). In this sense, philosophy does not prescribe any norms or values: instead it should think the sense of what makes action as such. The linkage of thinking and ethics is the ultimate source of the bringing into discussion of the notion of "originary ethics". Thinking, as Heidegger observes, is anchored in action, precisely because sense is at issue in action. It appears that the issue is not to reveal thinking as intellectual conduct, but it is an enframing of the sense of Being. More specifically, the ethics that we are faced with in Heidegger's "Letter on Humanism" refers precisely to existence. The focus is placed on anyone's everyday existence that "finds itself requested to make sense" (Nancy, 1996/2002, p. 71). Only questioning itself gives the existent the possibility of discovering norms and values in its action.

What is at stake in this critique of *Dasein*'s action and conduct is an attempt at a hermeneutical reading of ethics: ethos is a making sense as such. Thinking of this hermeneutical conduct is, according to Nancy, "originary ethics". This clarification allows for a final comment about the relation between ontology and ethics in Heidegger's philosophy (Heidegger, 1947/1993, pp. 256-257) Thinking, being a thinking of ethos as conduct according to the truth of Being, is more fundamental than ontology. As Nancy specifies, "it does not think 'beings in their Being', but 'the truth of Being'" (Nancy, 1996/2002, p. 78). Nancy then unfolds what can be called the very ethicality of Being: the thinking of Being does not only involve an ethics, but it involves itself as an ethics (Nancy, 1996/2002, pp. 78-79). Thus, we can justify the notion that the thought of being has an ethical dimension: "Originary ethics" is the more appropriate name for

‘fundamental ontology’. Ethics properly is what is fundamental in fundamental ontology” (Nancy, 1996/2002, p. 78).

The question of ethics is thought as non-metaphysical in so far as, for Heidegger, metaphysics has never been capable of thinking Being itself without regard for Being’s determination in terms of beings and entities. Here the distinction between Levinas and Heidegger becomes clear: Levinas attempts to make ethics “first philosophy” – that is, a metaphysics and as such an ethics which is opposed to ontology. As Critchley points out, Levinas tends to create a metaphysical opposition (Critchley, 1999, p. 15). But Heidegger himself would argue that this attempt leads us to a continuation of the oblivion of the truth of Being that is presupposed and dissimilated by all ethico-metaphysical discourse. It appears that the issue, in the end, is the characterization of the entire onto-theological adventure of Western metaphysics (Critchley, 1999, p. 16).

In the discussion of ethics in Levinas and his relation to Heidegger, the focus is usually placed on a deconstructive analysis of ethics. This problematic was elucidated in Critchley’s book on *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Levinas and Derrida* (1999). Critchley is careful to insist on the similarity between Derrida’s understanding of ethics and Heidegger’s understanding as presented in his “Letter on Humanism”. What is Derrida’s strategy in reading Levinas’s ethics? Derrida’s analysis is meant to imply that one must not practice ethics in the usual sense of the word, but one must engage in a deconstructive analysis of the “ethicity of ethics” (Derrida & Labarrière, 1986, p. 71). Thus, Levinas’s project can be considered as a calling into question of the value of values, which reminds one of the Nietzschean enterprise. However, in Derrida’s interpretation, Levinas stands outside of all previous ethical accounts within the history of European philosophy, even including Heidegger’s project. As Derrida puts it: “when Levinas speaks of ethics – I would not say that this has nothing in common with what has been covered over in this world from Greece to the German philosophy of the 19th Century, ethics is wholly other, and yet it is the same world” (Derrida & Labarrière, 1986, p. 71).

To make this claim is basically to think in the context of *Otherwise than Being*, where Levinas argues that the thought of the Good beyond Being is a third option that exceeds the ontological difference between Being and beings (Levinas, 1974/1981, p. 42). Following Critchley’s interpretation, Levinas’s use of the word ethics is a stepping beyond “semantic transformation”. We are still dealing with the same word and we are employing it in the same way, but, as Derrida notices, its meaning has been displaced. In

his turn, Blanchot adds: “This banal word that generally qualifies, in prosaic and bourgeois fashion, a man who is mature, lucid and conscious ... one must try and understand how Levinas has renewed it, opened it up to the point of making it signify (beyond all sense) the responsibility of an other philosophy” (Blanchot, 1980/1986, p. 28).

Why, according to Derrida, can Levinas’s ethics be considered a deconstructive project? The argument can be found in the following statement by Levinas: “The concept of the ego can correspond to me only inasmuch as it can signify responsibility, which summons me as irreplaceable” (Levinas, 1974/1981, p. 126). Here we are dealing with what Levinas calls “me voici” (Levinas, 1974/1981, p. 114). This is a perspective on the basis of which Derrida makes a comment: the word “ethics” is able to exceed its traditionally determined domain because of the irreducible particularity of my obligation to the singular other, prior to procedures of universalization and legislation. It is that very obligation of the singular other which comes to constitute the ethicality of ethics: “The respect for the singularity or the call of the other is unable to belong to the domain of ethics, to the conventionality and traditionally determined domain of ethics” (Derrida & Labarrière, 1986, p. 71). Critchley notes that Derrida’s principal concern is to apply the title “ultra-ethics” to Levinasian ethics. He traces a deconstructive attempt to displace ethics and bring it into a new dimension by locating its condition of possibility in the relation to the Other (Critchley, 1999, p. 19).

In brief, I can say that Levinas’s reading of Heidegger unfolds in a double movement. Levinasian “Being is exteriority” is thought to be human being opened to exteriority. For Levinas, it is a metaphysical and humanistic determination of the truth or essence of Being. Critchley notices that such a determination of Being is metaphysical according to a Heideggerian account. But, at the very final stage, Levinas fails to see the radicality of the question of Being as a question, and is thus logically, if not chronologically, pre-Heideggerian. According to Critchley, Levinas’s texts exceed a metaphysical (in Heidegger’s sense) and ontological language of Being as exteriority “in order to bring the thought of the other than Being that decisively interrupts metaphysics or ontology” (Critchley, 1999, p. 19).

To conclude, I claim that, by transforming the notion of intentionality through the concept of metaphysical desire, Levinas finds an event that happens beyond the limits set by the phenomenology of consciousness. As demonstrated in many ways, Levinas takes his inspiration from Heidegger’s existential analytic of *Dasein*. For Levinas, as for Heidegger, phenomenology develops a philosophical meaning of

subjectivity: they both investigate the subject which is not an origin of itself or sufficient to itself. However, Levinas privileges ethics in the phenomenological search for subjectivity and decides that the subject is

ethical and not existential: "no language other than ethical could be equal to the paradox which phenomenological description enters" (Levinas, 1974/1981, p. 193).

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