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## ETHICS BEYOND THE BODY: DESCARTES AND HEIDEGGER IN EMMANUEL LEVINAS'S *TOTALITY AND INFINITY*

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In his *thèse de doctorat*, published in 1961 as *Totalité et Infini*, Emmanuel Levinas sought to interrogate and rethink the Western philosophical tradition, which he saw as a tradition of Totality, and to shift the emphasis of his project away from a concern with the body as the locus of representation, and towards an understanding of the Other.<sup>1</sup> In doing so Levinas works from Martin Heidegger's critique of Western metaphysics by removing the emphasis on the *ego cogito* from the center of the equation but he does not follow Heidegger in shifting the emphasis of his investigation toward Being. Instead, Levinas discovers an unexpected ally in the implementation of a Heideggerian critique of metaphysics. Levinas turns to René Descartes as understood through Heidegger's critique of intellectualism in order to shift the focus of his argument from an emphasis on the primacy of the "I" as located in the body, to an emphasis on the exterior relation to the Other. This is not the Descartes employed by Edmund Husserl or Jean-Paul Sartre but instead the Descartes of the "Third Meditation."

In Descartes's reflections on the relation of the finite to the infinite, Levinas saw the key to escaping the concept of Totality that had dominated Western philosophy from Plato to Heidegger:

It is true that I have the idea of substance in me in virtue of the fact that I am a substance; but this would not account for my having the idea of an infinite substance,

when I am finite, unless this idea proceeded from some substance which really was infinite. (Descartes 31)

This utilization of Descartes implies a return to intellectualism as in the work of Husserl since it relies on the “idea of infinity” as produced by an “I think,” but what is significant for Levinas is precisely the limited nature of intellectualism as shown in Heidegger’s critique of representation. For Levinas, the idea of infinity exceeds the limits of representations, it exceeds the body in which it is produced and thus puts the primacy of the *ego cogito*, as the source of thought and representation, in permanent question. Levinas works with and against Heidegger in his use of Descartes to remove the primacy of the “I” (which was also Heidegger’s project) but without removing the “I” as the source of cognition and prime locus of philosophy (which is antithetical to Heidegger’s project). This conservation of the radical singularity of the “I” is more than a movement away from the ontology of Being as in Heidegger because it also serves to break with the program of Totality that seeks to incorporate the “I” into a larger model or system, be it positivism, neo-Kantian rationalism, or the Hegelian concept of Absolute Knowledge. Levinas opposes his understanding of Infinity to the traditional understanding of Totality, a concept structurally linked to all totalizing projects based on thematization and representation. Their source is ultimately the body of the subject (the Same), the meter by which all else is measured. Totalizing structures, while necessary for society to exist, are potentially devastating and disastrous if the rule of Totality banishes Infinity, which Levinas characterizes as the source of all ethics and as exterior to the body. Thus there is much at stake for Levinas who explains, in astonishing understatement, that his critique of Totality “came, in effect, after a political experience that we have not forgotten” (*Ethique* 73).<sup>2</sup> The primary reference is to National Socialism.

## *Totality and Infinity*

*Totality and Infinity* is an especially difficult book because it serves both as a critique and rehabilitation of Western philoso-

phy. Thus the book does not serve as a clean break with the Western metaphysical tradition, as in Heidegger's "Letter on Humanism," but is rather an attempt to reread Western philosophy in a new light, shifting the emphasis through an internal critique of the Western philosophical tradition. While relying heavily on the work of Heidegger as the source of his critique of traditional intellectualist and theoretical philosophy, Levinas mobilizes this revised understanding of intellectualist philosophy against Heidegger. Unlike Heidegger, Levinas does not want to displace the intellectualist tradition but instead to reread it in light of its limitations as presented in Heidegger's critique of representation. Levinas's goal is not to remove the subject from philosophical investigation but to put it in question permanently. For these reasons *Totality and Infinity* is also an extremely difficult book to explicate because it folds in on itself. The concept of Totality, which Levinas sets up in opposition to Infinity as the all encompassing unity that seeks to remove all singularity in the need to establish a universal whole and from which the singular being must separate itself, turns out to be based on the model of that separated being as manifested in the body, the locus of representation. Thus one cannot consider this model in any sort of progressive or teleological fashion but only as an ambiguous relation. To understand the relation of Levinas's work to Heidegger's and to Descartes's, and his break with traditional French philosophy, we must first try to establish the two categories of Totality and Infinity as understood by Levinas and then read Levinas's understanding of the place of the finite being, the subject, back into these two categories so that we can see how Levinas attempts to redefine metaphysics as ethics in a way that uses Heidegger's philosophy to re-think Descartes.

### *Totality*

For Levinas, Totality describes the essence of the Western philosophical tradition. As the basis for politics, war, and most institutions in society, Totality is the system of Universal Reason that attempts to codify everything within a unifying theory or practice. As such, Levinas portrays Totality as the tyranny of the Same, whereas, Infinity is characterized as the opening to alter-

ity. In the critique of Totality which comports the association between the two words (Totality and Infinity) there is a reference to the history of philosophy. This history can be interpreted as a tendency toward Universal synthesis. It is a reduction of all experience and all that is sensible to a Totality that engulfs the world and does not let anything outside in, so that consciousness becomes absolute thought.

This tendency toward Totality can be traced to the model of the individual subject, as manifested in the body, from which it is extrapolated. Particular experience becomes Universal synthesis on the basis of thematization and representation: "the consciousness of the self is at the same time consciousness of everything. . . . There are very few protestations against this totalization in the history of philosophy" (*Ethique* 69). For Levinas, all systems of thought that aspire to pure reason or Absolute Knowledge are examples of this totalizing tendency, which seeks to make that which is Other conform to the rules of the Same. "The 'I' is identical in its very alterations. It represents them to itself and thinks them. The universal identity in which the heterogeneous can be embraced has the ossature [framework] of a subject, of the first person. Universal thought is an 'I think'" (*Totality* 36).

Universal thought does not open to the Other but represents what is other as recognizable to the same. In the Hegelian system where the "I" confronts the Other the encounter between the "I" and the Other is not based on a desire to understand difference but instead on the desire to define and possess the Other in relation to the "I." The Desire for Recognition, as in Alexandre Kojève's presentation in his *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, is a desire that the Other recognize you at the value you feel you are worth. It is not a desire to discover the worth of the Other. The fact that the encounter leads either to Mastery or Slavery shows that this model is based on "the possibility of possessing, that is, of suspending the very alterity of what is only at first Other, and Other relative to me" which is "the way of the Same" (*Totality* 38).

The totalizing tendency goes beyond philosophies of conflict (such as Hegel's dialectic); even utopian, positivist, or idealist philosophies that deal only with Universal Principles are sites of

Totality. What makes Totality so dangerous is that it rests in the guise of such formulas as the "universal rights of man," and thus appears to be the basis of morality, when in fact it suppresses any possibility of morals.

Absolute Knowledge as it has been researched, promised, or presented by philosophy is a thinking of Equals. In "truth" Being is engulfed. Even if "truth" is considered as never definite it still promises a truth that is more complete and more absolute. There is no doubt that because we are finite beings we could never achieve this task, but on the basis by which this task is attempted it consists in making the Other become the Same. (*Ethique* 85)

For Levinas, the project of Totality is the project of equivocation, of creating categories of definition based on perception, specifically vision. It is a process of objectification and classification that removes all that is particular and different in order to create a universal system of representation.

Even in the critique of Totality it is still possible to embrace it. This is the nature of Levinas's claim against Heidegger whom Levinas credits as supplying the critique of representation and the intellectualist tradition of theory centered in the "I" and the body of the subject. While Levinas agrees with Heidegger's critique of the limitations of intellectualism, Levinas did not believe Heidegger had escaped the influence of Totality. Levinas sees Heidegger's removal of the subject, Cartesian *cogito*, as playing into the hands of the totalizing tendency. For Levinas, Heidegger's removal of the primacy of the subject would have been significant if it had opened the clearing to the Other. Instead, Heidegger removed the "I" and shifted his focus to the question of anonymous Being, in effect denying the possibility of primacy to either the "I" or the Other. For Heidegger, Being is primary. According to Levinas, Heidegger's ontology of Being is a structure of Totality because it subsumes all beings under the rubric of an anonymous and total Being that is complete unto itself. "The relation with Being that is enacted as ontology consists in neutralizing the existent in order to comprehend or grasp it. It is

hence not a relation with the Other as such but the reduction of the Other to the Same" (*Totality* 45–6).

Levinas sees Heidegger's critique of the Western metaphysical tradition as valid but sees Heidegger's philosophical project as removing any possibility for an ethics, precisely by focusing on Being and thereby removing the subject from the equation. For Levinas, this emphasis on anonymous Being can only lead to the domination of particular beings by the general category of Being. By removing the subject Heidegger removes the locus of any encounter with the Other, obviating ethics. In his emphasis on Being, Heidegger seeks to avoid egocentric subjectivity, while for Levinas "alterity is only possible starting from me" (*Totality* 40). This is to say that it is only from the position of the subject, the me, in relation to the Other that an engagement with the Other as Other becomes possible. What makes this structure difficult to grasp is that while the encounter with the Other can only occur in relation to the particular subject, the particular subject (the "I") is the basis for the philosophy of Totality which seeks to subsume the Other as part of the Same through universal thematization and objectification.

Levinas claims that the tendency toward Totality is based on a misreading because "the common element that allows me to speak of an objective society by which man comes to resemble an object is not the first" (*Ethique* 72). This is to say there is a moment prior to the construction of "objective society" that is the basis on which we have society. This leads Levinas to question whether "the social, with its institutions, Universal forms, and laws, comes to limit the consequences of war between man, or whether it limits the infinite that opens the ethical relation between man and man?" (*Ethique* 75). For Levinas, the answer is clearly the latter. But society cannot simply be dismissed: universal reason based on representation and thematization is necessary for human beings to exist collectively. A society could not exist without recourse to general rules or codes that define the parameters of that society. Levinas is not suggesting dismissal of the concept of Totality but rather a rethinking of that concept in relation to Infinity, without which the outwardly directed but self-absorbed project of Totality, whose prime goal is to organize

men and things into structures of power and thus give them control over nature and each other, goes completely unchecked and completely outside the realm of the ethical (Poirié 12). While organization and objectification are necessary at some level, this project can have horrendous repercussions if left unchecked. In response to the unbridled rule of Totality, Levinas offers the possibility of Infinity.

## *Infinity*

According to Levinas, Infinity is the most difficult concept to grasp precisely because it is not graspable. Infinity is beyond representation and thematization and thus completely beyond what is comfortable or controllable for a finite being. We have recourse to Infinity but not to the understanding of Infinity. It presents itself in forms like Levinas's construct of the *il y a*, which is the rumbling of infinite and anonymous Being—and as such is beyond any particular subject. Levinas also offers the model of the elements (earth, sky, wind, sea), which imply the infinite to us in our finite understanding of the world; we cannot grasp the elements as we grasp an object. They are not representable. We name them but, according to Levinas, we cannot thematize them. They always exceed our attempts to contain them:

The navigator who makes use of the sea and the wind dominates these elements but does not thereby transform them into things. They retain the indetermination of elements despite the precision of the laws that govern them, which can be known and taught. The element has no form containing; it is content without form. . . . The depth of the element prolongs it till it is lost in the earth and the heavens. "Nothing ends, nothing begins." (*Totality* 131)

The elements and the *il y a*, which are closely related, imply Infinity but they do not announce it. This is to say that the presence of Infinity is felt in our everyday life, but as anxiety, unease, and discomfort, because it is a feeling of lack of control. We flee from this anxiety that is produced by the *il y a* and the



elements, seeking refuge in the totalizing structures that give us the illusion that we are in control over the world. Thus in confronting the elements or the *il y a* we do not recognize the Infinite but only the menace of the unknown.

Levinas presents us with a seemingly paradoxical structure; the exteriority of Infinity is unrepresentable, entirely beyond the grasp of finite being, but at the same time it is the only means by which the "I" can engage the Other in its alterity without reducing it to the Same. But if the Infinite does not present itself for thematization because it is unrepresentable, how can we have recourse to the Infinite and thus to ethics? Levinas's answer is that the Infinite is the original moment prior to finite being, prior to the body, prior to representation, and prior to Totality. Infinity is always already there for us as implied in the elements. The question thus becomes how we recognize the Infinite: how do we recognize that which is beyond our capacities for recognition? Here Levinas turns to Descartes and doubles back on his own critique of Totality to reread the philosophical tradition and articulate how we come to engage the moment, prior to Totality, which is the realm of Infinity.

It is true that I have the idea of substance in me in virtue of the fact that I am a substance; but this would not account for my having the idea of an infinite substance, when I am finite, unless this idea proceeded from some substance which really was infinite. (Descartes 31)

For Levinas, the realization of Infinity can occur only through the intellectual act of reflection, which requires a *cogito*, as Husserl pointed out, but for Levinas a *cogito* understood as limited in its capacity. For Levinas, Infinity lies outside of the realm of equivocation and thematization, which is the realm of the Same extrapolated from the body of the finite being, and thus stands as entirely Other. The *cogito* can think the idea of Infinity but our idea of Infinity is necessarily inadequate, as Descartes shows. For Levinas, all other ideas can be made to fit into a Husserlian model of intentionality, but the idea of Infinity exposes the limited nature of representation:

The idea of Infinity is exceptional in that its *idéatum* surpasses its idea, whereas for the things the total coincidence of their 'objective' and 'formal' realities is not precluded; we could conceivably have accounted for all the ideas, other than that of Infinity, by ourselves. (*Totality* 49)

The idea of Infinity does not come from the interior but somehow from the outside. The idea of Infinity punctures the Self as that which is always the Same and opens it to that which comes from outside, to that which is totally Other. "Infinity is characteristic of a transcendent being as transcendent; the infinite is the absolutely Other" (*Totality* 49). By returning to the intellectualist tradition through his critique of Totality, Levinas presents the relationship with Infinity that comes to us in our relationship with the Other as the relationship between a specific *ego cogito* and that which exceeds it and thus places its primacy in question. For Levinas, this rapport between the Same and the Other can only occur to a thinking being capable of reflection. This relationship with Infinity is not produced by the thinking being—the "I" does not escape Totality by itself. Instead, it is produced by the Other, which pierces the "I" and breaks Totality. "It is not 'I' who resists the system, as Kierkegaard thought; it is the Other" (*Totality* 40).

Thus as Levinas presents it, it is the presence of the Other that produces the idea of Infinity in the isolated subject (the Same). This is because the Other is beyond me, completely exterior to me, and resists thematization and objectification. Whereas Totality attempts to incorporate the Other as the Same, Infinity opens up the possibility of accepting the Other in all its alterity and as such calls into question the primacy of the "I" (the Same). At this moment the "I" must relinquish its dominant position as "the measure of all things" in favor of the Other that Levinas considers the origin of ethics. "The idea of Totality and the idea of Infinity differ precisely in that the first is purely theoretical, while the second is moral" (*Totality* 83). But the ideas of Totality and Infinity are thus linked because the separated finite being requires the realm of the theoretical to produce the idea of the

infinite which comes from the Other and places the idea of Totality in question.

Infinity occurs only after reflection in the model of Husserl's "consciousness of," but reflection is not sufficient to contain Infinity. The importance of Heidegger's critique of intellectualism is that it allows Levinas to conserve a space for Infinity in the realm that is beyond representation. Like in Heidegger, Levinas does not jettison intellectualism but returns to it through a nuanced reading based on Heidegger's critique.

The idea of Infinity does not proceed from the I, nor from a need in the I gauging exactly its own voids; here the movement proceeds from what is thought and not from the thinker. It is the unique knowledge that presents this inversion—a knowledge without a prior. The idea of Infinity is *revealed*, in the strong sense of the term. . . . Infinity is not the "object" of a cognition (which would be to reduce it to the measure of the gaze that contemplates), but is that which is approachable by a thought that at each instant *thinks more than it thinks*. (*Totality* 61–2)

This construction is not Husserlian, because the contemplative act is inverted so that the *cogito* does not produce the idea of Infinity as in the concept of intentionality. But it is certainly not Heideggerian either because the emphasis is still on a *cogito* and the intellectual process in the model of intentionality. Instead, this model is based on the breach of the separated finite being, the Same, which occurs in the idea of Infinity which is produced in the relation with the Other. This is the moment of discourse. "Truth arises where a being separated from the Other is not engulfed in him, but speaks to him. Language, which does not touch the Other, even tangentially, reaches the Other by calling upon him or by commanding him or by obeying him, with all the straightforwardness (*droiture*) of these relations" (*Totality* 62).

According to Levinas, man's principal and originary relationship is not with finitude, as Heidegger had supposed, but instead with language. But language is also dangerous because it necessarily leads to thematization, which is the realm of the

Same. Language is always in danger of degrading and becoming a mechanism of the Same that removes the alterity of the Other. For Levinas, what is essential in language is that it is given. Its use already implies the Other in all its alterity. Language ruptures interiority, pierces the body, and opens separated finite being up to the Infinite through the act of speech, which implies the Other. Language is always more than it is and thus always implies the infinite. Language is a constant calling into question of the primacy of the Self in the face of the Other who gives me language: "A calling into question of the Same—which cannot occur within the egoist spontaneity of the Same—is brought about by the Other. We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other 'ethics'" (*Totality* 43). The presence of the Other is announced in discourse, which presupposes all of the other social structures that exist under the rubric of Totality. Thus the calling into question of the self by the presence of the Other as manifested in language is the primary moment of philosophy and society and affirms the primacy of ethics.

Language announces the Other in its alterity and thus it places the Self in question, and by placing the Self in question it opens up the possibility of an ethical society based on alterity instead of homogeneity. "The relation of the face to face both announces a society and permits the maintaining of a separated 'I'" (*Totality* 67–8). Thus for Levinas, community is not originally established on the model of Totality but on the basis of the face-to-face, which is the model of alterity. Levinas wants to re-think society in light of this revelation which presupposes the relation with the Other, Infinity.

Levinas does not want to break with metaphysics but to re-read it through his conception of ethics. Our understanding of concepts like Desire, Freedom, Responsibility, and Language can then take account of the primacy of Infinity and the necessity of thinking alterity, and only then can philosophy break the grip of Totality and present the possibility of an ethical society. But Levinas does not present this rethinking in the form of a prescription or programmatic imperative. This would be a return to the model of the Same. Instead Levinas attempts to construct a system based on that which cannot be thematized or object-

ivized. It is not a program of political engagement but of philosophical instruction, a teaching that offers the possibility of more than it says.

In this light Levinas is able to reevaluate such structures as work, economy, the state, and even philosophy based on the idea of Infinity (the Other) and not on the idea of Totality (the Same). In this sense, Levinas's work is the systematic development of an understanding that had never been thought through before (*Totality* 19). Levinas presents a system based entirely on difference, not homogeneity. Thus Levinas challenges all of the previous Western philosophical traditions to rethink their projects in light of the possibility of Infinity, the possibility of alterity.

### *Conclusion*

Levinas's attempt to move beyond the Western metaphysical tradition by rehabilitating the very meaning of metaphysics is especially interesting in Levinas's use of Descartes, as filtered through Heidegger, to *displace* the primacy of the *ego cogito* in favor of the Other. But Levinas's work also opens up the possibility of rereading the Western philosophical tradition in the light of an ethics of alterity, plurality, and difference. Levinas turned away from traditional philosophy and the work of Heidegger to engage what he felt was the most pressing issue of philosophy in the wake of the Shoah, namely an understanding of the ethical relation with the Other. Rather than turning away from metaphysics, Levinas sought instead to redefine metaphysics as first and foremost ethics but as ethics which come from the Other: an ethical system from beyond the body of the subject.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on an investigation I began in chapter eight of my dissertation, *The Reception of Martin Heidegger's Philosophy in France: 1927–1961*, diss., UCLA, 1998 (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> All translations from *Ethique et Infini* are my own.

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*Le Corps et L'Esprit*  
*in French Cultural Production*



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# *Le Corps et L'Esprit* in French Cultural Production

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The UCLA French Department Graduate Students'  
Fourth Annual Interdisciplinary Conference  
April 16–18, 1999

*Ce serait le moment de philosopher et de  
rechercher si, par hasard, se trouvait ici  
l'endroit où de telles paroles dégèlent.*

Rabelais,  
*Le Quart Livre*

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