Chapter 4

LEVINAS' CRITIQUE OF HEIDEGGER AND
EXTENSION OF THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL METHOD

1 Introduction

Although it was Husserl's phenomenological method that offered to Levinas
the possibility of engaging in meaningful philosophical work, we have
seen in the previous chapters that there was a reluctance on Levinas'
part to accept this methodology in a wholesale fashion. Levinas did not
think that Hussel's phenomenological program took into account the
deepest levels of the concrete life of the living subject. To overcome
this limiting theoretical preoccupation of Husserl's work Levinas turned
to Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology which utilized analyses of the
existential situation of human being as an opening into the ontological
dimensions of philosophical questioning that Husserl had not followed
out.

This turn to Heidegger, however, was short-circuited by the
intervention of World War II and Heidegger's involvement with National
Socialism. It is our view that this situation created a deeply felt
context which led Levinas to a sometimes passionate critique of
Heidegger's fundamental ontology and, ultimately, to the formulation of
his own unique method of inquiry which was meant to compensate for the
insufficiency that Levinas now perceived, not only in the work of Husserl
and Heidegger, but in the whole tradition of Western philosophy as well.

The horror of the Holocaust motivated Levinas to reject all philosophical systems where consciousness and freedom were held to be primary and which he believed were thus caught up in a will to power that was essentially egoistic and totalitarian. As a consequence, he began to formulate a philosophy of his own in which the ethical and not the ontological would be considered to be most fundamental.

This attempt to situate Ethics as First Philosophy, however, involved a serious problem of method for Levinas. How Levinas dealt with this problem, how he attempted to go beyond both Husserl and Heidegger's versions of the phenomenological method, will be the focus of the second part of this present chapter. In sum, what we want to accomplish here is, first, to show how the context of the Holocaust led Levinas to a thoroughgoing critique of Heidegger's ontology; secondly, to outline this critique in general terms in order to, thirdly, show how this critique left Levinas with a difficult methodological problem that he resolved through the development of what we have characterized as his philosophical poetic method. These considerations will conclude our formal analysis of the primary contexts guiding our investigation. This will put us in a position to turn directly to an evaluation of Levinas' ethical philosophy in the following chapters and to see how the priority of responsibility functions as a linchpin within this philosophy.

2 The Heidegger Controversy

In our investigation of Levinas' critique of Husserl we pointed out that his analysis had been influenced by Heidegger's work in Being and Time. Husserl had formulated the basic design and worked out the master plan

for recapturing the ground philosophy had lost to science. But it was Heidegger, armed with Husserl's arsenal of phenomenological weapons, as well as with the canon of his own ontological distinction and ranks of existential analyses, who took phenomenology to the trenches of Dasein's everyday life and who thus forged a major assault on the ancient citadel of Being. In the beginning, Levinas had been moved by Husserl; but he was enthralled by Heidegger.[1]

In 1932, a few years after the publication of The Theory of Intuition, Levinas published an article on Heidegger entitled "Martin Heidegger et l'ontologie," which, according to Peperzak, formed the first part of a book on Heidegger that Levinas was working on at the time. In this article, Levinas dubbed Heidegger's philosophy "one of the high points of the phenomenological movement" because of its "brilliant originality and power of his effort," an effort for which "fame has not been mistaken and did not come too late."[2] But this was 1932. Thirteen years later, after having experienced the horror of World War II up close, Levinas would have a different opinion of Husserl's successor. In fact, in 1949 "Martin Heidegger et l'ontologie" would be republished in En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl and Heidegger, but in a "modifed and abridged" form where the earlier accolades had been excised.[3] And the book that this article had presaged was, needless to say, never brought to fruition.

But other texts came in its place. The first of these was Existence and Existents (1947) where Levinas began delineating what John Wild would later call "one of the most basic attacks on the thought of Heidegger that has yet been formulated."[4] The details of the story which brought about this radical alteration of Levinas' attitude are well-known and we do not intend to dwell on them in detail here. But in order to

adequately understand Levinas' philosophical position in regard to
Heidegger, according to our thesis in this present study, it is crucial
to have at least some cognizance of the historial climate in which this
position was worked out.

Despite the time and all the discussion, the questions involving
Heidegger's association with Nazism will not be put to rest, as recent
publications show.[5] This whole situation is further complicated when
trying to understand Levinas' philosophical relation to Heidegger because
of the fact that Levinas is a Jew who was imprisoned in a Nazi stalag
during the war, which is where, in fact, he first jotted down the text of
Existence and Existents.[6] Here is a situation where the life experiences
of a thinker are so closely intertwined with the subject matter of his
thought that a clear separation of the two is impossible. Regardless of
what one may think about it, Heidegger the philosopher and Heidegger the
Nazi were one and the same person. This unity of the philosopher and the
work is true for Levinas, too, regarding his own particular life
circumstances. Even under the influence of the purest epokhe, Levinas,
the philosopher, can no more be abstracted from his deep and abiding
commitment to Judaism than Aquinas can be defrocked of his Catholicism in
a consideration of his philosophy or Plato and Aristotle meaningfully
plucked out of the homosexual context of the Greek culture in which they
thought and wrote. With a sense of irony and a tone of resentment that
belies an obliviousness to such historical and cultural contextualism,
Erazim Kohak has asked: "Why didn't Heidegger's profound insight warn him
against national socialism?"[7] Oddly enough, Levinas himself provides some
answers to this rhetorical question which are more sympathetic to our
view. Perhaps, Levinas speculates, it was because Heidegger thought the
world was going to pieces and that Hitler might be the answer; perhaps it

was because Heidegger's wife was pro-Hitler from early on.[8] Perhaps, we might add, it was because, as Heidegger himself would say later: "He who thinks greatly must err greatly."[9] Whatever the reason, the fact remains. And it remains for Levinas as well. We certainly cannot expect an objective evaluation from him and, in our view, we should not. But because the Holocaust provides an important slant to Levinas' work, we must nevertheless take his strong attitude into account as an important context for our investigation of his philosophy.

Levinas remarks in many places that he is unable and unwilling to forget the horror of the Holocaust and Heidegger's involvement with it. Let us cite a sampling. In "Signature," for example, he says of his own biography that "it is dominated by the presentiment and the memory of the Nazi horror."[10] And in a particularly harsh reference to Heidegger, especially in light of Levinas understanding of forgiveness, in Quatres Lectures Talmudique he states that "one may forgive much of the German people but there are some Germans whom it is difficult to forgive. It is difficult to forgive Heidegger."[11] And although he maintains admiration and praise for Being and Time, he finds "much less convincing" the work done after 1940. He is quick to add that "I do not say this owing to Heidegger's political engagements, taken several years after Being and Time." But this disclaimer is immediately qualified by: "... even though I have never forgotten those engagements, and though Heidegger has never been exculpated in my eyes from his participation in National Socialism."[12]

We do not see how it is possible to put such strong attitudes aside in considering Levinas' 'purely' philosophical relation to Heidegger. Luk Bouckaert at least admits that it is an issue, and concludes that Levinas' critique of Heidegger "has undoubtedly been

influenced by the experience of the war and by the attitude of the persecuted Jew towards the German," before consigning the whole issue to the margins of his own 'purely' philosophical reflections.[13] Steven Gans, on the other hand, seems a bit extreme in suggesting that "if Levinas' (philosophical) analysis is correct then the link between Heideggerian philosophy and Nazi politics is established." And, in our view, his evaluation of Levinas' critique of Heidegger is as "exaggerated and unfounded" as he claims Levinas' "strictures against Heidegger" to be.[14]

Let us point out that it is in no way our intention here to demonstrate a link between Heidegger's philosophy and the politics of National Socialism. Neither do we intend to judge Heidegger's actions nor Levinas' reactions. But insofar as we hold that phenomenological philosophy is a way of life and a living philosophy, we do not think that it can be separated from the personal, social, cultural, and political climate in which it was formed. Furthermore, we are in disagreement with some of Levinas' philosophical evaluations of Heidegger. Had it been possible for Levinas to be more open to the development of Heidegger's thought after _Being and Time_, even if it is understandable that he was not, he might have found that Heidegger did indeed have a change of heart regarding that early work, although he did not repudiate it. But Heidegger does say that "the fundamental flaw of the book _Being and Time_ is perhaps that I ventured forth too far too early."[15] The same might be said for his involvement with the Nazis. Heidegger's well-known "_Kehre_" that occurred after _Being and Time_ revolved around the question of language, dialogue, and healing, and, in our estimation, brought his thinking closer to Levinas' ethical position than Levinas is willing to admit, despite the differences that remain, as we have argued in another place.[16] Having said this much and without forgetting these

circumstances, let us now turn to the substantive philosophical aspects

of Levinas critique of Heidegger's work which form the point of departure

for the development of Levinas' own original phenomenology in Existence

and Existents based on his new understanding of method.

3 Levinas' Critique of Heidegger

We can approach Levinas critique of Heidegger from the perspective

of four main issues.[17] These are: (1) the question of the status of

ontology, whether the interrogation of being qua being should be

understood as "first" philosophy, a position it has held since the time

of Aristotle because of its fundamental importance to all other

philosophical investigation; (2) and following from the first question,

whether freedom understood as free will and the priority of consciousness

supporting this, ought to be the defining characteristic of subjectivity,

particularly as this has been understood since Kant's "Copernican

revolution" and whether this can lead to an adequate account of

intersubjectivity; (3) whether in Heidegger's philosophy there is a

presupposition of the subject as Dasein without an adequate explanation

of how it is that Dasein comes to be on the scene; and (4) whether the

question of the understanding of Being as nothingness in the Heideggerian

ontology adequately accounts for the existential reality of the living

subject. The delineation of these four categories is somewhat arbitrary

and naturally there is some overlapping and intertwining among them,

particularly around the question of subjectivity and intersubjectivity.

The purpose they are intended to have here, as with our investigation of

Levinas' relation to Husserl, is to show how it is that the foundation of Levinas' thought is grounded in a critique of Heidegger's ontology. Let us look more closely at each of these areas of Levinas' critique of Heidegger.

3.1 The Problem of Ontology

First of all, Levinas argues that classical ontology will never be able to arrive at an adequate understanding of subjectivity and intersubjectivity because it remains within the realm of knowledge, consciousness, light, and truth. For Levinas, the human subject, as we indicated in the previous chapter, cannot be reduced to an intentional object, cannot be brought into the phenomenological light of consciousness. Human beings can be "approached" but not known.[18] Thus, insofar as both Husserl and Heidegger, indeed the entire history of Western metaphysical philosophy in Levinas' evaluation, situate cognitive knowledge as the highest goal of philosophy, and understand ontology as the ground and foundation of all knowledge, they will be unable to approach the true meaning of human being.[19]

We have tried to show, on Husserl's behalf, that the type of knowledge he was after was not of the same kind as the natural sciences and that he may thus be exempt, at least somewhat, from Levinas' critique, although it is certainly possible to find texts where his desire for the apodicticity of pure and absolute knowledge can be easily interpreted as aiming at cognitive closure, while other texts mitigate against this conclusion. The same can be said of Heidegger. In Being and Time it is true that he wanted to formulte the question of Being "explicitly and transparently."[20] Yet his thinking on the issue of

thinking, knowledge, truth, and the Other underwent a transformation in his later work, which Levinas does not take into account, or, to the extent that he does, believes there is no significant change.[21] But since it is our concern here to show the development of Levinas' thought and not that of Heidegger, we will not dwell on our defense of Heidegger, but will rather focus on how Levinas' critique of Heidegger is integral to his theory of the priority of responsibility.

3.2 The Problem of Freedom

A correlate which follows from this critique of the primacy of knowledge, in Levinas' view, is that it leads to a conception of freedom as an ultimate value, freedom here understood as free will or the freedom of spontaneity. This has important ramifications for the understanding of both subjectivity and intersubjectivity. On the one hand, the sovereignty of freedom leaves the self-sufficient human subject isolated from other human beings in a prison of solitude with "no exit," which is the necessary guarantee of its freedom and, on the other hand, and as a result of this fundamental solitude, relations with other human beings are reduced to a politics of "imperialist domination" and tyrannical control. Levinas puts it succinctly: "Ontology as first philosophy is a philosophy of power," and, as a philosophy which does not call into question the sovereignty of freedom, it is also "a philosophy of injustice."[22] In this situation no genuine relation with the Other, no transcendence or love is possible since the reduction of the Other to a content of knowledge, to the representational categories of identity and sameness, results in the disappearance of the Other.[23] Levinas will argue that genuine relationship with the Other necessitates that the Other

remain truly other, since relationship implies two distinct terms; but _at_
the same time, contact, approach, or transcendence across the distance of
this separation, i.e., intersubjectivity, must also be possible without
destroying the otherness of the Other. Here is the heart of what Levinas
is trying to accomplish. And this is one of the primary reasons why
Heidegger's notion of "Miteinandersein," Martin Buber's "I-Thou,"
Sartre's "Mitsein," and all other philosophies of communion, are not
acceptable in Levinas' view. Being-with is "an association of side by
side, around something," Levinas argues, "around a common term and, more
precisely, for Heidegger, around the truth."[24] The problem of this "with"
association around a third term, the way ordinary conversation between
two persons, for example, always revolves around a subject matter to be
thought, that is, reduced to a common noema for each of the two
interlocutors — the way "a neighbor is an accomplice" — the problem
with this is that there is no real transcendence out of this freedom of
solitude: as Levinas says, "sociality in Heidegger is found in the
subject alone."[25] Consequently, since this "dialectic is not dialogue,"
Levinas will attempt to replace the "with" of intellectual communion,
where "the thinking subjects are obscure multiple points" and
"empirically antagonistic," with the "for" of responsibility, as we will
see.[26]

3.3 The Problem of Presupposing the Subject

A third area of Levinas' disagareement with Heidegger is that in
Being and Time he begins his study of the question of Being from the
point of view of a _Dasein_ that is already constituted in the horizon of
the comprehension of Being and, although Heidegger wants to clarify the

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nature and essence of <u>Dasein</u>, he does not ask after its origin or genesis. "The ontological significance of an <u>entity</u> in the general economy of Being, which Heidegger simply posits alongside of Being by a distinction," is exactly what Levinas intends to work out in <u>Existence</u> <u>and Existents</u>.[27] Heidegger begins with an understanding of <u>Dasein</u> as that being capable of questioning its own being, of asking the question "What is Being?" But, in Levinas' view, he does not ask the more fundamental question of how it is that this being <u>is</u> at all, how it comes to be a being. <u>Dasein</u> finds itself already situated within the horizon of Being, thrown into this economy and thus able to appear "only in an existence which precedes it, as though existence were independent of the existent and the existent that finds itself thrown there could never become master of existence."[28] Showing how it is that existence can be conceived separately from the existent and how the existent thus emerges as an existent in a seizure and domination of anonymous existence will be the primary problematic of <u>Existence and Existents</u>.

3.4 The Problem of Being and Nothingness

The fourth area of disagreement, connected with the previous one, involves the ontological distinction itself. Whereas Levinas says that "the most profound thing about <u>Being and Time</u> ... is this Heideggerian distinction," at the same time he is critical of Heidegger's understanding of it.[29] According to Levinas, Being in general is understood by Heidegger as nothingness, revealed in the experience of anxiety: "Anxiety, a comprehension of nothingness, is a comprehension of Being only inasmuch as Being itself is determined by nothingness."[30] In <u>Being and Time</u> Heidegger says that "the 'nothing' of readiness-to-hand is

grounded in the most primordial 'something' — in the world." And ,
ontologically considered, the world "belongs essentially to Dasein's
Being as Being-in-the-world," so that it is in the face of
Being-in-the-world that anxiety is anxious. Anxiety is the revelation of
Dasein's potentiality for being, "its Being-free for the freedom of
choosing itself and taking hold of itself."[31] But this potentiality must
be understood in terms of Dasein's finitude as Being-toward-death, an
ecstasy which is necessarily geared toward the nothingness at the end,
and which, consequently, Levinas argues, "situates the tragic element in
existence in this finitude and this nothingness into which man is thrown
insofar as he exists" so that "the dialectic of being and nothingness
continues to dominate Heideggerian ontology."[32] In Existence and
Existents Levinas will suggest a third possibility that is neither Being
nor nothingness, a possibility not situated in the horizon of a
comprehension of Being, but in a sensible experience of it.

4 The Agenda Behind the Critique

There is an agenda behind the critique that Levinas has leveled at
Heidegger and Husserl, as well as at Nietzsche, Hegel, Kant, Leibniz, and
the entire tradition of Western philosophy, a history that culminated, in
one sense, in "the civilization of transcendental idealism" which, in
Levinas' estimation, is responsible for Auschwitz.[33] Within this horizon
of the Holocaust, Levinas' agenda will be to establish a new
understanding of human being where the ethical takes precedence over the
ontological, where intersubjectivity is more fundamental than the
subjectivity of the sovereign individual, and where the responsibility of

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justice is prior to freedom of consciousness. But this agenda and the critique it has promoted (in our view, and consistent with Levinas' philosophy, the agenda came first) creates a problem of method. What this problem of method is, and the manner in which Levinas deals with it, are crucial to understanding, not only Levinas' unusual _style_ of philosophy, but how this style is intimately connected to the very content it expresses, which, as we are arguing, is all aimed at establishing the priority of responsibility. Let us now turn to this problem of method underlying Levinas' philosophy and his solution to it which emerge out of his critique of Husserl and Heidegger.

5 Beyond the Phenomenological Method

5.1 Urimpressionism

The methodological problem Levinas is left with after his critique of Husserl and Heidegger, as well as his summary critique of Western philosophical thought, is this: while employing Husserl's phenomenological method, as Levinas claims he does, how can he establish the primacy of the ethical relation of responsibility over the knowledge relation of consciousness with a method geared toward the production of knowledge, as Husserl's method is? Is not Levinas caught in his own critique the moment he writes a lucid sentence?

The phenomenological method, particularly as this is understood without grasping the difficulties surrounding Husserl's supposed intellectualism, which we will have cause to consider again below, that is, understood as a _purely_ cognitive technique, obviously cannot be used to show the inadequacy of phenomenology without involving a

contradiction. Philip Lawton points out this self-referential problem in his article on the notion of the "il y a," Levinas' alternative to Heidegger's Being understood as nothingness.[34] If he is to go beyond the knowledge orientation of phenomenology, Levinas must go beyond the method too. Which he does, although not entirely. "Phenomenological description," Levinas says, "which by definition cannot leave the sphere of light, that is, man alone shut up in his solitude, anxiety and death as an end ... will not suffice."[35] In order to bring the primacy of the ethical at least into the sensible twilight, "a method is called for such that thought is invited to go beyond intuition."[36] Levinas will do this through a new and radical understanding of intentionality as we have already indicated and which will be investigated in detail below. To what extent Levinas can go beyond the light of knowledge and still claim to be doing philosophy is another question. It is our contention that Levinas does indeed employ the phenomenological method but, at the same time, goes beyond the intellectualist view of Husserl's understanding of it, without actually leaving it. Thus he avoids the reductio ad absurdum of Lawton's analysis. The problem is that Levinas wants to approach pre-cognitive situations which cannot be formally thematized. But he wants to do this with language that is more or less 'comprehensible'. This can only be possible if not all language is necessarily thematizing, in a formal, representational sense — which it is not.

We have already given some indication of how Levinas will handle this problem in the discussion of sensation and intentionality in the previous chapter. Instead of focusing on the already synthesized or represented object proper to Husserl's understanding of intentionality, Levinas will attempt to suggest, point toward, indicate, and approach the pre-cognitive, sensible 'object' that is the palpitation, the "sentance"

which Husserl called the "Empfindnis" and about which he was ambivalent in regard to whether this was experienceable or not. The Empfindnis is the hot-house of thought 'located' in the instant of the Urimpression. Now the reason why Husserl was ambivalent about this, as we have already suggested, has to do with his own agenda. To allow pre-cognitve sensation to be in some manner intentional, and thus experienceable, would mitigate against the constitutive dimension of intentionality, the noetic process of producing noemata, and open his analysis to an empiricism from which he was trying to escape. In our view, Husserl never rectified the problem of the status of the Empfindnis with the theory of constitution. It is exactly in the virgule of this ambivalence, this "fecund ambiguity," that Levinas situates his own method.

Instead of trying to grasp the urimpressionistic matter under investigation, such as the il y a, to take Lawton's example, and which we will look at in more detail below, Levinas will try to tease it out obliquely by analyzing and describing in a more traditional phenomenological manner the essence of other, more concrete phenomena from everyday experience, a move he undoubtedly picked up from Heidegger's hermeneutic approach to the existential analysis of Dasein. This method involves Levinas in a three-step process. First of all, there must be a basic intuition of a problematic situation, such as Levinas' contention that Heidegger's ontological distinction results in a comprehension of Being in general that is equal to nothingness, a situation which is unsatisfactory to Levinas because it does not adequately account for the genesis of existents in the world or for intersubjectivity. That is the problem. Performing the phenomenological reduction, the second step, Levinas finds that Being in general is not

any thing, but not nothingness either. What is 'it'? To answer this, Levinas analyzes, again, within the epokhe, other, more tangible situations such as insomnia, modern art, laziness, etc. Then, thirdly, and this step Lawton seems to overlook completely, these essences are predicated analogically to illuminate the unknown term, the il y a in the present example. In insomnia we are held awake by an 'it' which keeps us awake against our will. Levinas calls this experience "wakefulness." Thus, Levinas will argue that the 'experience' of the il y a : insomnia :: insomnia : wakefulness. The more difficult question is whether this is a true or merely figurative analogy. And, furthermore, whether so-called figurative analogies are productive of knowledge. Or, perhaps even more basically, whether any knowledge, properly speaking, is possible outside of the principle of identity and non-contradiction, which seems to be the root of the whole issue.

5.2 Philosophical Poetics

There is another tack to Levinas' approach which seems to be intended to circumvent this logical difficulty of the status of analogy, an aspect of Levinas' extension of the phenomenological method which many commentators overlook. It will not be merely a matter of grasping the phenomenologically reduced essences of the everday experiences, or what it is that is analogically pointed at through them, but of actually putting oneself in the very experience that is revealed through these analyses, in the manner in which the appreciation of poetry is as much, if not more so, a sensual as an intellectual experience. The "unnameable," Levinas says, "can only appear in poetry."[37] Poetic language does not thematize in the sense of cognition. It creates sensible 'vibrations' or resonances in the body of the reader. This is

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why it is best to read poetry aloud, although that is not necessary since even silent reading is a kind of reading aloud. The 'representation' of poetic language, as both the "later" Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty realized, involves a non-conceptual 'intentionality'. It is only sensual eunuchs, like Merleau-Ponty's unfortunate Schneider in _The Phenomenology of Perception_, those who have lost touch with this level of sensual experience, who would deny its existence.

Levinas employs a species of what we have called elsewhere "the philosophical-poetic method."[38] In the context of discussing how it is that fatigue reveals not only a negative weariness of self and others, but, in that very weariness itself, a _positive_ contract with existence (_il y a_), a profound and pre-cognitive commitment to life from which the weariness shrinks, Levinas says that to get at this deeper, positive dimension, the "philosopher has to put himself in the instant of fatigue and discover the way it comes about." This does not mean trying to grasp it in respect to a system of references but experiencing it just as it happens in the instant, in progress. But the "instant" will turn out to be exactly what Husserl meant by the "now-point," the _Urimpression_, not yet objective, but approachable in the dynamics of the sensible. "And to scrutinize the instant," Levinas says, "to look for the dialectic which takes place in a hitherto unsuspected dimension, is the essential principle of the method which we have adopted."[39]

It is in the break-up of cognition, the disruption of the thematizing process, that the unnamable palpitation of the _event_ under consideration can be approached. It seems that Lawton does not understand the meaning of "event" as opposed to cognitive experience. Contrary to his analysis, "events" _are_ lived through.[40] This is precisely what Levinas is indicating with the term "sentance." It sounds the same

as the French word "sentence" (a maxim, or a judgement handed down by a court), but the visual impact of changing the 'e' to an 'a' disrupts the attempt to "see" intellecutal closure, as the Empfindnis refuses to be reduced to a noema. What Levinas is trying to do is to bring "events" to the 'light' of experience which are, by definition, pre—cognitive, that is, outside of the light and the sight of the intellect alone, and which thus cannot be reduced to conceptual closure in comprehension.[41] The language Levinas uses, always bordering on the poetic, wants to catch the dynamism of the event in its process of becoming an intentional, i.e., represented object, but before it gets there.[42] Levinas calls this process "amphibology." In his discussion of the "I" in Existence and Existents, for example, before the "I" has become an identity, a self with a name, he says that "the 'I' has to be grasped in its amphibological mutation from an event into an 'entity', and not in its objectivity."[43] But this amphibological mutation is what is created in the instant, the very dynamic of the perpetual birth of the 'I' in the present.

5.3 An Undemocratic Method

Let us add a final note here regarding the style of Levinas' language and his adaptation of the phenomenological method. We have been trying to show from the beginning how the phenomenological method differs from the rationalistic understanding of method in the natural sciences. There is a democratic aspect of the scientific method which hearkens back to the Enlightenment understanding of reason, which is brought out well by Hans—Georg Gadamer in contrasting philosophical reason with that of contemporary science, a position which we have discussed elsewhere.[44] Given the foundation of the scientific method in Enlightenment

rationalism, it is supposed that any rational being ought to be able to apply it, if the rules are meticulously followed, achieving the same results as any other rational being; like constructing and analyzing syllogisms. The scientific method is a technique.

But the phenomenological method, unlike the scientific method, is intimately connected with the particular _person_ who is employing it, with this person's abilities, talents, life-experiences, etc. The phenomenological method is thus _de facto_ not democratic. Not everyone can employ it with equal felicity. It is more like learning to play the cello, also not democratic, than memorizing and applying the rules of a logical system with technical accuracy. Computers will never be able to perform phenomenological analyses. In this respect, Levinas seems to be close to Nietzsche and (the 'later') Heidegger in their understanding of language. We recognize that this raises the entire question of the relation between art and skill in philosophy, as well as that ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy, as Plato pointed out, a lover's quarrel in our view, but which would demand a separate study and thus will not be pursued here.[45] We only want to suggest that the subtlety and nuance of Levinas' language, as is also true with Nietzsche and Heidegger, may be baffling to those of a more democratic methodological leaning. Levinas' language works in the dark, in the blink of an eye. He is trying to say in sentences, or "_sentances_," what is happening all at once, in the indescribable flicker of an instant. This can be befuddling to those who can digest nothing but clear and distinct ideas and who feel ill at ease until they have reduced all poetic thought to kilobytes.

6 Conclusion

One might say that all of Levinas' philosophy, and certainly his theory of the priority of responsibility, 'takes place' in this mutation of the instant, the methodological principle of which involves a scrutinizing of the panting and the palpitation of that instant. It involves scrutinizing the naked event before it has become conscious of its nudity, before it has "washed, wiped away the night, and the traces of its instinctual permanence" from its face, become "clean and abstract" and put on the formal clothing of objectivity which would hide its humble origin and make it presentable to the world.[46]

But, rather than talking about Levinas' scrutiny of the instant, which always confronts the commentator with the problem of reducing a living thought to a carapace of clarity, let us move toward Levinas' actual employment of it, since, as he himself says, his "investigations will bring the necessary clarifications of this principle by the applications they shall make of it."[47]

1. Poirié, p. 75.

2. "Martin Heidegger et l'ontologie," Revue Philosophique 57 (1932): 395-431; quoted from Peperzak, "Phenomenology."

3. "Martin Heidegger and l'ontologie," in DEHH, pp. 53-76.

4. John Wild, in the Introduction to TI, p. 20.

5. See, e.g., Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut, Heidegger et les Modernes (Paris: Grasset, 1988); Pierre Bourdieu, L'ontologie politique de Martin Heidegger (Paris: Minuit, 1988); Victor Farias, Heidegger and Nazism (Philadelphia: Temple U. Press, 1989).

6. EE, Preface, p. 15 / pp. 9-10.

7. Erazim Kohak, Idea and Experience, (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1978) p. 193.

8. Poirié, p. 79.

9. Martin Heidegger, "The Thinker as Poet," in Poetry, Language, Thought, trans. A. Hofstadter (New York: Harper, 1971), p. 9.

10. "Signature," p. 177.

11. Emmanuel Levinas, Quartres Lectures Talmudiqe, Collection "Critique" (Paris: Minuit, 1968), p. 56.

12. EI, p. 41 / p. 32.

13. Luk Bouckaert, "Ontology and Ethics: Reflections on Levinas' Critique of Heidegger," International Philosophical Quarterly 10 (Sept 1970): 402.

14. Steven Gans, "Ethics or Ontology: Levinas and Heidegger," Philosophy Today 16 (1972): 117-121.

15. Martin Heidegger, "A Dialogue on Language," in On the Way to Language, trans. Peter Hertz (1959; New York: Harper, 1971).

16. Robert D. Walsh, "The Healing Word: Language, Thinking, and the Question of Being in Heidegger's Philosophy," presented at DISCIPULI, 2nd annual graduate conference in Philosophy, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, California, April 10-11, 1986.

17. Our analysis differs somewhat from that of C. D. Keyes in "An Evaluation of Levinas' Critique of Heidegger," Research in Phenomenology 2 (1972): 121-42, although some of the points overlap.

18. "Language and Proximity" in CPP, p. 118.

19. EE, p. 49 / p. 77.

20. Martin Heidegger, Being and Time, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, (1927; New York: Harper, 1962), p. 27.

21. TI, p. 275 / pp. 252-253.

22. TI, pp. 46-47 / pp. 16-17.

23. TO, p. 41 / p. 19; cf. TI, pp. 89-90 / p. 62.

24. TO, pp. 40-41 / pp. 19-20; EE, p. 41 / p. 61.

25. TO, p. 93 / p. 89; cf. EE, p. 41 / pp. 61-62.

26. Emmanuel Levinas, "Diachrony and Représentation," in TO, pp. 100-101.

27. EE, p. 83 / p. 141.

28. TO, p. 45 / p. 25.

29. Ibid.

30. EE, pp. 19-20 / p. 20; TO, p. 51 / p. 29.

31. Being and Time, p. 232.

32. EE, pp. 19-20 / pp. 20-21.

33. Poirié, p. 84.

34. Philip N. Lawton, Jr., "Levinas' Notion of the 'There Is'," Philosophy Today 20 (1976): 68.

35. EE, p. 85 / p. 145.

36. EE, p. 66 / p. 112.

37. EE, p. 57 / p. 91.

38. Robert D. Walsh, "An Organism of Words: Ruminations on the Philosophical Poetics of Merleau-Ponty," Kinesis 14 (1984): 13-41.

39. EE, p. 30 / p. 42.

40. Lawton, "'There Is'," p. 69; cf. TO, p. 74 / pp. 62-63.

41. Levinas, "Intentionalité" in DEHH, p. 157, n. 1; cf. EE, p. 31 / p. 44.

42. EE, p. 35 / p. 51.

43. EE, pp. 79-80 / p. 136.

44. Robert D. Walsh, "Hans-Georg Gadamer's Reason in the Age of Science,"

Auslegung II (F 1984): 417–424.

45. See, Robert D. Walsh, "Speaking the Unspeakable: A Philosophical Poetic Interpretation of Plato's Sophist" presented at The Ninth Annual Meeting of the International Association for Philosophy and Literature, Iowa State University, Cedar Rapids, Iowa, 3–5 May, 1984.

46. EE, p. 40 / p. 60.

47. EE, p. 30 / p. 42.