

## Chapter 5

### THE ESCAPE FROM BEING: RESPONSIBILITY AS SELF-ASSERTION

#### 1 Introduction

The task Levinas sets for himself in Existence and Existents is to show how it is that a human being, an "existent," comes to be understood as an existent over and against being in general or, as Levinas calls it, "existence." In describing this ontological genesis, a development Heidegger did not concern himself with in Being and Time, Levinas will also need to deal with the question of the meaning of the being of the existent, the existential analysis which Heidegger did take up.<sup>1</sup> Although Levinas begins his analysis from a consideration of Heidegger's ontological distinction, the existential analysis of Dasein and its heuristic employment as a preliminary, hermeneutic study for approaching the ontological question of the meaning of being in general becomes the critical target of Existence and Existents.<sup>2</sup>

Levinas says that he renders Heidegger's distinction between Being and beings as "existence" and "existents" "for the sake of euphony," but there is undoubtedly a more concrete and subjective tone to Levinas' terms in keeping with his desire to work from an experiential or ontic foundation in the development of his 'ontology'.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, let us

note that because it becomes evident from the text of Existence and Existents that Levinas is interested in seeing how it is that the existent comes to be or can be understood as a definite or separate being through a movement out of or over and against existence, one wonders if the French title of this text, De l'existence à l'existant, would not be better translated as From Existence to the Existant since that is precisely the amphibology Levinas intends to scrutinize.

Let us begin our study with a brief overview of this existential amphibology which will help to set the stage for the more detailed analysis which follows.

## 2 The Program of the First Movement

Through phenomenological analyses of insomnia, modern art, laziness, effort, action and fatigue, Levinas establishes that existence is not just an abstract notion by which beings are understood, but, rather, is a tangible force, a gravity, a weight that is experienced as oppressive and against which the existent must take up the task of existing at every instant through the effort of action, the task of distinguishing itself as a separate, autonomous, conscious individual. This is a constant task of perpetual birth and cannot be accomplished once and for all. It takes continual effort to posit oneself as an identity against the regressive forces that would overcome us and keep us from standing up and becoming a somebody.

Effort takes the form of action, a surplus of energy over the stasis of merely being. Action is understood basically as the taking up of a position within the positionless 'night' of sheer existence.

Through the production of a hesitation, a fold in the uniform being of existence, the establishment of a position in the present instant through the effort of action, there occurs a suspension of the anonymity of existence in an existent, which is no longer anonymous but who now has a name; the existent is a 'somebody'. This is the first movement of consciousness, a movement of enlightenment and knowledge.

Levinas approaches this emergence of consciousness through an analysis of sleep, since sleep, in Levinas' view, contrary to the common understanding, is understood as an interruption of the vigilant wakefulness of insomnia. It is a positing of ourselves in a place, the taking up of a bodily position in the here and now. Indeed, as we will see, position and being a body are coextensive. Sleep is associated with the consciousness of the natural attitude. It is in the taking up of a position through the effort of action in the instant that the existent takes charge of his or her existence, takes it on, as it were, and in so doing becomes an existent. The existent is thus understood to be a "master of Being," in many respects similar to what Nietzsche understood as the "sovereign individual."<sup>4</sup>

This is the positive side of the amphibology from existence to the existent. The existent has now accomplished, in all sincerity, the enjoyment of the world and the power of consciousness and knowledge in the freedom of spontaneity. But there is also a negative aspect of this amphibology. In achieving separateness, the existent also finds itself in a radical solitude, as if this were the price to be paid for being a somebody. The existent attempts to evade this burdensome solitude of separateness in two ways: through the knowledge relation with what is other and through the relation of enjoyment. But both of these evasions fail to overcome and escape from the radical solitude of separateness.

In escaping from the clutches of anonymous Being, the existent seems to have been inadvertently caught in a Sartrean cul de sac from which there is no exit. How this solipsistic problem will be dealt with by Levinas and the philosophical difficulties it poses, will be the focus of the following chapter. But let us now turn to an analysis of this escape from existence, this ontological adventure of the genesis of the existent, in more detail.

### 3 The Residue of the Reduction: "Il y a"

#### 3.1 Insomnia and Wakefulness

In the contemporary anxiety about the end of the world, framed within the constant threat of a nuclear holocaust; in the complaints of the lack of meaning to life which follow from the suspicion of the nothingness at the root of it all; in the despair of which Kierkegaard, Sartre and the existentialists have made us so acutely aware, in all of this there is, according to Levinas, an important lesson to be learned.<sup>5</sup> And it is not the lesson of infinite resignation or the necessity for a blind leap of faith. What is to be learned from this "ancient obsession" with the end of the world is that it is not so much a fear of life's ultimate failure or meaninglessness that generates the despair. Rather, in Levinas' view, it is a fear of our potential for a successful life, a fear of being, before which we tremble and hold back. Let us look more closely at Levinas' positive construal of this ancient obsession.

If we perform the epokhe, if we contemplate the idea of the end of the world, the annihilation of all beings and existents, Levinas argues, what we are left with is not an absolute void or nothingness, as

Heidegger supposed, or some 'pure ego', as Husserl thought, but an anonymous state which is a 'something' that is yet no-thing, "an impersonal 'field of forces' of existing."<sup>6</sup> Levinas designates this brute Being, existence without existents, by the term "il y a."<sup>7</sup> The il y a is the sheer facticity of Being, not what it is but that it is. It is the experience, "if the term experience were not inapplicable to a situation which involves the total exclusion of light," of that which is not a something yet is not nothing either.<sup>8</sup> It is something more than the flux that Heraclitus saw in the rushing river where one could not bathe twice. In Levinas' view it is closer to the interpretation Cratylus gives to the Heraclitean river, where one cannot even bathe once.<sup>9</sup> It is the indefinite, par excellence, like Anaximander's apeiron.<sup>10</sup> But it is not pure absence. It is not Heidegger's nothingness. Rather, it is the presence of an absence, as is indicated in the reference to a spurned love that "you don't know what you've got 'til its gone." Here is the presence of an absence that can return with a vengeance.

The il y a is a presence which can "appear later as a content," Levinas says, "but originally is the impersonal, non-substantive event of the night." As with all the forms of exteriority that Levinas will uncover, the il y a involves a certain paradoxical situation:"

Darkness, as the presence of absence, is not a purely present content. There is not a "something" that remains.... It is like a density of the void, like a murmur of silence. There is nothing, but there is being, like a field of forces. Darkness is the very play of existence which would play itself out even if there were nothing. It is to express just this paradoxical existence that we have introduced the term "there is" (il y a).<sup>11</sup>

In its immediacy, in the pre-conceptual, sensible palpitation of the Empfindnis where we are in contact with the il y a, 'it' always slips away from the attempt to grasp it in a theme as an experience. But it should not thereby be understood as an experience of nothingness. If it

resists thematization because it "embraces and dominates its contradictory," it can nevertheless be glimpsed in some well-known although not well-understood experiences from everyday life.<sup>12</sup>

We come into contact with the anonymous density of existence without existents in the enforced "vigilance" of insomnia, for example, a vigilance which Levinas distinguishes from "attention" in that vigilance is not directed to any object. Furthermore, Levinas says, "attention presupposes the freedom of the ego which directs it. But "the vigilance of insomnia which keeps our eyes open has no subject."<sup>13</sup> It is an anonymous vigilance, a faceless and oppressive weight standing in "an opposition to possibilities of sleep, relaxation, drowsiness, absence."<sup>14</sup> The il y a is the gravity of existence, the lassitude of existence against which we must struggle, despite ourselves, in order to become an existent. And there is no way to escape this gravitational weight which lurks just beneath the surface of our every action, although we may try to evade it, just as we cannot avoid insomnia when 'it' comes, an unavailability which is exactly what makes it be what it is.

Insomnia is not merely being unable to fall asleep, for sleep, in Levinas' understanding, will be a taking up of a position and will be associated with consciousness. Sleep should not be understood as unconsciousness either, but as a repose within being, that is, within consciousness. Unconsciousness, which is not the repression of consciousness, will be understood as a moment of the il y a. In insomnia there is a positive being held to wakefulness, a condemnation to being awake, an unwanted vigilance. We have no choice about it. It is exactly our freedom of choice which has been overcome since insomnia is experienced against our will. Insomnia confronts us with the raw and oppressive fact of being present, not to anything, just being present:

One watches on when there is nothing to watch and despite the absence of any reason for remaining watchful. The bare fact of presence is oppressive; one is held by being, held to be. One is detached from any object, any content, yet there is presence.<sup>15</sup>

Insomnia is a "vigilance" despite ourselves. In this vigilance there is no inside or outside. What we get a glimpse of here is the "indefectibility of being, where the work of being never lets up," an impossibility of taking up the position of sleep.<sup>16</sup> The il y a is neither consciousness nor unconscious; it is pre-conscious.

Levinas uses a phenomenological analysis of the relation between sleep and insomnia here to provide an experiential basis for his argument from which he wants to draw an analogy to the relationship between consciousness and existence in general, as was argued in the previous chapter in considering Levinas' method. Insomnia is understood as contact with the il y a insofar as sleep is to insomnia what consciousness is to the il y a. In order to overcome the gravity of the il y a, consciousness must posit itself in the same way that insomnia stops when one is able to take up the position of sleep. Thus insomnia is understood by Levinas as "wakefulness," a generic 'state' in which consciousness participates but against its will, as it were, despite itself.

The wakefulness of insomnia, however, is not consciousness, since consciousness is always directed at an object. In wakefulness, Levinas wants to say, Being is putting pressure on us to be. Wakefulness would turn into consciousness if, in the face of insomnia, we were to make the effort to get out of bed and to do something — an effective practical remedy for this unfortunate affliction. But to hold to Levinas' analogy here, sleep, understood as consciousness, is precisely what has not yet occurred in the vigilance or wakefulness of insomnia, a vigilance which is like a rude and enforced sobriety:

We are, thus, introducing into the impersonal event of the there is not the notion of consciousness, but of wakefulness, in which consciousness participates, affirming itself as a consciousness because it only participates in it. Consciousness is a part of wakefulness, which means that it has already torn into it. It contains a shelter from that being with which, depersonalized, we make contact in insomnia, that being which is not to be lost nor duped nor forgotten, which is, if we may hazard the expression, completely sobered up.<sup>17</sup>

Consciousness "tears" into wakefulness the way sleep can tear into insomnia, bringing the horror of it to an end. But insomnia, understood as a kind of call or command to wake up from the il y a (by going to sleep), is a limit situation, happening against our will, a situation which is also approximated in "certain awakenings of delirium, in certain paradoxes of madness...."<sup>18</sup> It is an irreverent sobriety and thus a radical depersonalization which must not be overlooked as the background against which the existent becomes an existent. Furthermore, we will see that the il y a is Levinas' first step toward establishing the priority of responsibility insofar as it is his first approach to a descriptive analysis of exteriority, and since the analysis and establishment of exteriority is the basis upon which Levinas will argue for the priority of responsibility. Exactly what is meant by exteriority, and how this figures in the argument for the priority of responsibility will be taken up directly at a later point of our investigation. But we must make an arduous journey before we arrive at a return to that.<sup>19</sup>

In addition to his phenomenology of sleep and insomnia, Levinas uses an analysis of modern art to approach the exteriority or otherness of the il y a.

### 3.2 Art and Ultramateriality

The disruption of sleep and consciousness that is the constant

force of the il y a, Levinas says, can be recognized in modern art and its revelation of an "ultramateriality" resulting from a break-up of the expected form, "the preference for broken lines, the scorning of perspective and of the 'real' proportions between things," a "break-up of continuity" which reveals, not nothingness, but an "unnameable" which, linguistically, "can only appear in poetry:"

Here is a notion of materiality which no longer has anything in common with matter as opposed to thought and mind, which fed classical materialism. Matter as defined by mechanistic laws which sum up its whole essence and render it intelligible is the farthest removed from the materiality in certain forms of modern art. For here materiality is thickness, coarseness, massivity, wretchedness. It is what has consistency, weight, is absurd, is a brute but impassive presence; it is also what is humble, bare and ugly.<sup>20</sup>

This 'materiality' has not yet become an object, and thus cannot, properly speaking, be seen; yet, in a disturbing manner, it can be experienced in a pre-conscious, i.e., pre-visual, contact — a sensing or sensibility (Empfindnis) that is prior to the representation of an intentional object. To be revealed visually, this brute but impassive presence of an absence would need the clothing of forms and the intentional parameters or categories of perspective, such as inhere, for example, in the notion of a landscape. The objectification of a landscape already involves the visual comprehension of the scene, making it into a scene, where the elements of the pre-thematic ultramateriality Levinas is pointing at have already been en-scaped, so to speak, in the frame of a form and thus formed into what can be neatly and coherently framed. But the ultramateriality revealed in modern art, through which we can glimpse the anonymity of the il y a, is a scapeless, formless apeiron that overflows its frame — a situation which is suggested, perhaps, in the disregard for the parameters of the frame found in some modern artworks, as if the artist were trying to represent that which

overflows the comprehending restrictions of the frame, what has not yet been set into Heidegger's equipmental system of usefulness and meaning.

Being naked, pure proliferation, ultramateriality is an exteriority that cannot be comprehended by the interiority of consciousness; it is precisely what disrupts this and leaves us speechless. The il y a is pure exteriority contacted in the instant of an Empfindnis in which there is not yet the distinction between inside and outside:

A material object, in being destined for a use, in forming part of a setting, is thereby clothed with a form which conceals its nakedness. The discovery of the materiality of being is not a discovery of a new quality, but of its formless proliferation. Behind the luminosity of forms, by which being already relates<sup>21</sup> to our "inside," matter is the very fact of the there is....

The il y a is prior to, not only the ontological distinction at the foundation of consciousness and thought, but the distinction between being and non-being as well. It is the ultramaterial ground of the possibility of the appearance of beings, the ground of the understanding of matter as substance and presence; primary matter. It is the darkness which makes the light of representation, consciousness, and knowledge possible; it is the palpitation, the scission of the Urimpression. It is the anonymity of the "It" in "It is raining."<sup>22</sup> The "Il y a" is what keeps returning after the negation of all being, the surplus of the negation's facticity where "the disappearance of all things and of the I leaves what cannot disappear, the sheer fact of being in which one participates, whether one wants to or not, without having taken the initiative, anonymously."<sup>23</sup>

In his depiction of the il y a, Levinas is trying to get at an understanding of matter before it has become a concept grasped in a representation. Although this cannot be directly comprehended as an

object of thought, it can be glimpsed obliquely in certain quasi-experiences, what we might call poetic disturbances or vibrations, non-representational intentionalities. We can see here the importance of our analysis of Levinas' method. The il y a, the first of Levinas' many analyses of exteriority, is revealed as a scapeless, formless, pre-thematic, 'presence' of an absence which is precisely the disruption of comprehension. Although Levinas will not return to any extended use of the il y a in his later works, since his analysis of the existent will take a different turn in Totality and Infinity with a focus on being-in-the-world understood as enjoyment, habitation and work in the context of intersubjectivity, nevertheless, the form of his argument here, the method he is employing, is central to his entire work. This we will see repeated over and over again.

For our historical analysis of Levinas' thought, however, what is important is to see how the il y a engages the existent prior to consciousness of it as an 'it', how the emerging existent participates in the il y a prior to any choice, the way one participates in insomnia. It is this aspect of the il y a that is the horror of being, the slipping away from being which in this horror simultaneously delivers me over to being, the way insomnia delivers one over to the raw fact of a vigilant presence, inescapably, by the anonymous 'it' which keeps me awake.

What Levinas is doing in his depiction of the il y a is challenging Heidegger's ontological analysis of Being understood as nothingness from the point of view of Dasein's comprehension of Being revealed in anxiety. The il y a is in no way comprehended. The existent participates in the il y a, senses it, experiences it, not as a "this" or a "that" which would already entail a comprehension of Being, but precisely as an experience of the inexperienceability of it, a disruption

of com-prehension. The existent is in contact with the il y a, not as a grasping of it but as a being gripped by it.

The horror of the anonymity of being, which is not the Heideggerian anxiety of nothingness but the wearisomeness of the task of separating ourselves from the gravity of sheer existence — a task which must be taken up at every instant — is glimpsed in other forms besides the night and insomnia and the ultramateriality revealed in some modern art. Every force which works against becoming conscious, against becoming a "master of being" and thereby "already a name in the anonymity of the night..." is a revelation of the il y a.<sup>24</sup> To wake up, to become conscious, to establish oneself as a self, to become somebody, is a task which one takes up as a struggle, an effort, a work of dealing with the facelessness and the regressive pull of the il y a. It involves an effort on the part of the budding existent against the oppressive weight of laziness, fatigue, insomnia, depression (a refusal to act), madness, and horror. Above all, the il y a is horrible because the essence of horror is "a movement which will strip consciousness of its very 'subjectivity'. Not in lulling it into unconsciousness, but in throwing it into an impersonal vigilance, a participation in the sense that Levy-Bruhl gives to the term."<sup>25</sup> Levy-Bruhl showed that the 'consciousness' of some primitive peoples had not yet reached the level of the subject/object distinction, i.e., what psychoanalysis, especially that of Carl Jung, refers to as "individuation."<sup>26</sup> Their existence was governed by a "participation mystique" that was still lodged in the unity of being.<sup>27</sup>

But how does the existent break free of the grip of the il y a? This process can be approached, again, obliquely, Levinas claims, by looking at its refusal in laziness and fatigue.

## 4 The Escape From Anonymity

### 4.1 Position and Hypostasis

What is necessary to break out of the grip of the anonymous existence which Levinas has characterized as il y a is the establishment of a beginning which takes the form of "a hesitation" or a halt in the anonymous rustling of existence, a beginning which always takes place in the instant as a present, a positing of oneself here, a taking up of a position in the face of the play of absence of the il y a in which there is no time, no instants, no present.<sup>28</sup> The emergence of the existent over and against or out of the il y a, the first moment of the existent's relation with its existence wherein it becomes an existent, the birth of consciousness, is what Levinas designates by the term "hypostasis:"<sup>29</sup>

Consciousness, position, the present, the 'I', are not initially — although they are finally — existents. They are events by which the unnameable verb to be turns into substantives. They are hypostasis.<sup>30</sup>

Levinas adopts the term "hypostasis" from the history of philosophy, going back to the emanationism of Plotinus, although Levinas applies this term in an original way. What he means by hypostasis is the coming-to-be of an existent, the existent's apparition in existence, not as a substance, but as the instantiating movement of a substantive self or 'I', a movement which shows "the amphibolous character of the 'I'," an 'I' in progress rather than a substantial object.<sup>31</sup> Levinas uses a grammatical image to explicate this. The function of a verb, he argues, is not the naming of an action, as if it were a noun. Its movement is the very production of language, the "bringing forth of the seeds of

poetry" to be nominalized. Hypostasis is the event of a substantive emerging in the anonymous verballity of being:<sup>32</sup>

We are looking for the very apparition of the substantive. To designate this apparition we have taken up the term hypostasis which, in the history of philosophy, designated the event by which the act expressed by a verb became a being designated by a substantive. Hypostasis ... is not only the apparition of a new grammatical category; it signifies the suspension of the anonymous there is, the apparition of a private domain, of a noun.

Hypostasis is a rupturing movement which requires effort and which can be viewed obliquely, Levinas suggests, in the refusal to make this effort, in laziness.<sup>34</sup>

#### 4.2 Laziness and Action

We experience the regressive pull of the il y a in laziness as a refusal to take up the task of our existence; it is a recoil or a hesitation to act, a forfeiture which goes to the very essence of our being.<sup>35</sup> Indolence is a refusal to take up the burden of our existence, to take on the task of standing up, of becoming an individual differentiated from the anonymous rustling of the undifferentiated, indeterminate, sheer bruteness of being. Laziness is the refusal to make the effort of beginning, it is a "recoil before action," a hesitation before existence, an indolence about existing itself. It is a remaining supine, prostrate, preferring "the pleasure of spending the morning in bed."<sup>36</sup> Levinas cites William James' well-known example, saying that laziness, as a refusal to be, lies somewhere "between the clear duty of getting up and the putting of the foot down off the bed."<sup>37</sup>

In refusing to make a beginning, to take on the "job" or work of becoming someone, caught up in a weariness of everyone and everything, a

weariness which is an "evasion without an itinerary," a freedom with no content, a refusal to "do something...to aspire after and undertake," the ego refuses to become a self, refuses the possibility inherent in the ever-renewing instant of birth:<sup>38</sup>

The trouble in acting from which the indolent one holds back is not some psychological content of pain, but a refusal to undertake, to possess, to take charge. Indolence is an impotent and joyless aversion to the burden of existence itself. It is a being afraid to live which is nevertheless a life, in which the fear of the unaccustomed, adventure, the unknown is a repugnance ~~de~~evolving from the aversion for the enterprise of existence.<sup>39</sup>

But even in this refusing to make an effort there is a positive moment which necessarily affirms existence since the very refusal of laziness is always a refusal to take up the challenge of existence which is thus presupposed. The "bitter essence" of indolence "is due to the fact that it is a desertion which attests to the contract sealed with existence," an attestation referred to in the "weary present" of the indolent one.<sup>40</sup> In the same manner, Levinas will assert that even suicide, in a most negative manner, paradoxically affirms life.<sup>41</sup> The very struggle of the existent to become an existent signifies a prior contract with existence that is unavoidable. In the regressive gravity of the il y a revealed in the experience of laziness, it is as if the existent is being called or challenged to do something, to do anything.

This challenge and the work of existence it entails is caught sight of in the refusal of laziness to shoulder this burden, a burden which is located in the reflexivity of existence, for "existence drags behind it a weight — if only itself — which complicates the trip it takes," Levinas says, so that "its movement of existence ... is bent and caught up with itself, showing that the verb to be is a reflexive verb."<sup>42</sup> It is in the face of the burden of this reflexivity, this doubling back on oneself in order to be oneself, that indolence is

indolent. Likewise, fatigue is understood by Levinas as a lag between a being and itself which "constitutes the advent of consciousness, that is, a power to 'suspend' being by sleep and unconsciousness," a power located in the instant of effort by which a beginning is made.<sup>43</sup>

#### 4.3 Effort and Fatigue

Magic happens all at once, Levinas says, at the stroke of the wand, where the magician "is not involved in the instant in which the work is really effected; he follows it from a distance." But the effort of human labor is different from the work of magic in that "human labor and effort are a way of following the work being done step by step."<sup>44</sup> Kant may have been awakened from his dogmatic slumber in an illuminating moment while reading Hume, but it took him the rest of his life and a great deal of effort to tell us about it. And Kant would not have had his instant of awakening at all if he had not first made the effort to read Hume. Indeed, Levinas asserts, "effort is the very effecting of an instant."<sup>45</sup> It is in the work of the instant that the existent comes to be an existent.

Action, and the effort it requires is, essentially, Levinas asserts, "subjection and servitude," but it is also "the first manifestation, or the very constitution, of an existent, a someone that is."<sup>46</sup> The existent becomes an existent standing out from the anonymity of the il y a, by a beginning, a taking-up and doing, an action. As action, in the context of the regressive pull of anonymous Being, beginnings require effort. In the case of the existent, an effort is required to overcome the lethargy and the wearisomeness of existence, to break out of the gravity of indolence in a movement directed toward a goal, a movement which defines all action as purposeful, teleological.

Effort is already a teleological judgement, an a priori intentionality or aim formed ex nihilo, a spontaneous effort to take up the burden of folding one's existence back on itself in the doubling of an "inwardness" or self-knowledge.<sup>47</sup>

We experience the il y a when we feel that weariness which is a weariness of everything and everyone, and "above all a weariness of ourselves."<sup>48</sup> It is the desire to escape our existence, to get away from it all. But even in these states there is already an attitude that is taken up toward our existence. They already presuppose a demand for action that is incumbent on us and which is thereby revealed in its refusal: "in weariness existence is like the reminder of a commitment to exist, with all the seriousness and the harshness of an unrevokable contract." We must do something.<sup>49</sup>

This burden that Levinas finds being to be is not what is meant by the Darwinian notion of "the struggle for life" because this presupposes an already existing being in its effort to prolong its life, a presuppositional problem which, as we pointed out in the previous chapter, Levinas also finds with Heidegger's positing of Dasein.<sup>50</sup> But what Levinas is trying to show is exactly how it is that an existent comes to be in the dynamism of the instant. It is not that we can first be and then take up or refuse our relation to existence. Rather, it is happening in a non-identifiable simultaneity. Following the reversal of the Cartesian cogito we saw in Husserl's understanding of intentionality and inner-time consciousness, it is precisely in our existing that we already find ourselves in relation to this existence.<sup>51</sup>

In these states which recoil against the unflagging obligation to exist, we are able to have an experiential glimpse of that inertia against which we must struggle in order to become someone. Being is a

drag for Levinas, it "is essentially alien and strikes against us.... There is a pain in Being."<sup>52</sup> But the fearful hesitation experienced in anxiety is not so much a recoil against the intimation of non-existence and the possible nothingness of death, as Heidegger thought. It is a recoil against life, against existing, against the effort that is already demanded of us to take up the task and the burden of life to which we have committed ourselves in an ontological contract that is prior to every other, which lies in the very instantiation, or instantiating, of our existence itself.

## 5 The Master of Being

### 5.1 Separation and Solitude

In extracting itself from the grip of the il y a, the existent becomes a "master of being."<sup>53</sup> This mastery of existence, which creates a kind of fold or crease in the plenum of existing, Levinas calls variously "inwardness," "interiority," "the inner life" and "solitude."<sup>54</sup> In Totality and Infinity, where it occupies a major portion of the text and is approached differently than in Existence and Existents, he refers to it as "separation."<sup>55</sup> Hypostasis, at this level of self-presence, is a mastery involving the achievement of a certain level of freedom and the exercise of a certain virility and sovereignty over existing. At first it is not the freedom of free will, although it becomes that, as we will see. It is "the freedom of beginning," Levinas says, the "freedom of the existent in its very grip on existing."<sup>56</sup> It is a freedom where "one possesses existence, but is also possessed by it."<sup>57</sup> It is the difference between being free to go where you will and the freedom to will where you

go, or what might be understood as the negative and positive aspects of the freedom of spontaneity.

At both of these 'levels' of freedom, however, there is a passive aspect of separation in which the existent is gripped by existence as much, if not more, than existence is grasped. There is an ambivalence about hypostasis in that, on the one hand, it is merely a relationship between the 'I' and itself, an inwardness which does not yet have a reference to anything outside itself. It is a process of becoming, a relation of one to one's self. Yet it is exactly the production of this inwardness, understood as interiority, which will make possible the relation with an exterior world. Here the interiority of the existent is understood more in the traditional sense of the subject who is a subject precisely insofar as it subjects that which is exterior to it to the category of objectivity. In this ambivalence of hypostasis, Levinas wants to affirm the absolute separateness of the existent which alone would make freedom possible and, at the same time, a participation with existence whereby the existent is affected by what is exterior to it but without compromising its separateness. This ambiguity is not clearly expressed in Existence and Existents, although Levinas confronts it there, but it becomes clearer throughout his later texts. At this point, let us suggest that part of the problem in our view involves Levinas' wrestling with Husserl's ambivalence between realism and idealism, as we pointed out in our study of the difference between Husserl's early and later works. In Existence and Existents and other early texts, such as "L'oeuvre," the manner in which Husserl's ambivalence is reflected in Levinas' work is particularly evident. We have already suggested that Levinas will eventually attempt to situate the crux of his own philosophy in the virgule of this ambivalence.

On the one hand, Levinas will argue for the constitutive power of the existent, that the existent is the creative center of itself and its world, a position consonant with Husserl's more idealistic formulations of the transcendental ego found in Ideas and The Crisis. On the other hand, Levinas will also attempt to recuperate a realism which nevertheless is not permitted to become the empiricism of the natural sciences. The existent will be shown to be sensibly affected by exactly that which it constitutes and, at the same time, to constitute that by which it is affected, based on the paradoxical relation of sensing and the sensed as we saw this revealed in Husserl's understanding of the Urimpression. This is a crucial point for Levinas' development of the notion of responsibility and we will find it necessary to return to it later in our study. But for now let us continue with his depiction of the existent's escape from the anonymity of existence.

In the space of the interiority of separation there is the formation of an identity, a relation of the ego or 'I' with itself which is both a departure from itself and a return to itself. It is thus, as Levinas says, "an enchainment to itself" where the "free being is already no longer free, because it is responsible for itself."<sup>58</sup> Just as this is a first level of freedom, it is also a first level of responsibility, a responsibility for self. Here, Levinas says, "I am forever stuck with myself."<sup>59</sup> In its new-found relation with itself, the existent is separating itself from existence in general, but only to find itself alone with itself in the solitude of an interiority:

Solitude is the very unity of the existent, the fact that there is something in existing starting from which existence occurs. The subject is alone because it is one.<sup>60</sup>

The existent is here, properly speaking, an individual. But it is precisely its solitude, the actuality of the existence of an existent,

which is "the price paid" for its very existing. Thus, Levinas concludes, the separation of the existent in the hypostasis "is not only a despair and an abandonment, but also a virility, a pride and a sovereignty."<sup>61</sup>

The separation of the existent from the anonymity of the il y a, however, is not yet an objective consciousness of the world: "to take up an instant through effort does not of itself found the relationship between the I and the world," Levinas says.<sup>62</sup> The separation achieved in hypostasis through the effort of action, by assuming a position, is like sleep or unconsciousness, both of which take place within consciousness, but which themselves are not yet consciousness in the objective sense of "intentionality, consciousness of..., simultaneously proximity and distance."<sup>63</sup> But this will also eventually come about. Hypostasis is an ambivalent and paradoxical situation. Insofar as the existent of the hypostasis has taken up a position in the present, there is not yet conscious relation to the world because the present of an instant has no duration as such. Time has not yet entered the instantaneous dynamics of hypostasis. Hypostasis is the immediacy of presence-to-self. The present is the way for an instant to be.<sup>64</sup> The instant, however, understood as a commencement, a beginning, in Levinas' view, is dynamic as well as paradoxical:

What begins to be does not exist before having begun, and yet it is what does not exist that must through its beginning give birth to itself, without coming from anywhere. Such is the paradoxical character of beginning.... A beginning does not start out of the instant that precedes the beginning; its point of departure is contained in its point of arrival, like a rebound movement.<sup>65</sup>

On the one hand, the instant of the present does not exist; like the Urimpression it is always a modality of "about to be" or "has just been" -- protention or retention. Levinas calls it an "ontological schema"

where the existent "does not exist; but it is an event of existing through which something comes to start out from itself." Thus, on the other hand, although it is an event that "must be expressed by a verb" it is nevertheless "already a something, already an existent."<sup>66</sup>

The present instant never stands still. If it did, it would have to have received its endurance from something that preceded it. But the present instant "is something that comes from itself."<sup>67</sup> This is what Levinas means by the "amphibolous" character of the 'I': "it is not a substance, nevertheless it is preeminently an existent."<sup>68</sup> To try to predicate anything about the 'I', that is, to define it by spiritual or psychological properties, would turn it into a substance bearing properties. It would perhaps be more proper to say that the 'I' is a mode of existence rather than a being. It is the identity of a relation with itself without reference to anything outside itself; a pure spontaneity of folding back on itself, a returning to itself without ever having left, coming from nowhere and going nowhere. But this is merely to define it as alone.<sup>69</sup> It is like a pure potentiality which cannot be experienced and thus cannot be approached by phenomenology.<sup>70</sup> But this relation with self that marks the emergence of the existent does not occur in thin air. The actual existence of the 'I' is manifested as materiality or being a body.

## 5.2 The Body and Materiality

The folding back of the 'I' into itself, manifested as bodily being, is where we can see the further development of the positive and negative aspects of hypostasis more clearly. Initially the positive and negative dimensions of hypostasis involve the tension of action and effort, on the one hand, and fatigue and laziness on the other. In the

context of the materiality of the 'I', however, the positive and negative aspects of hypostasis will be viewed in terms of the world. The positive aspect here is the power and virility of the 'I' over the elements of the world; the negative aspect is the very encumbrance of the body, a being stuck with oneself, being alone. In the present the 'I' is burdened with itself. This burden is precisely its materiality. The upsurge of the 'I' is associated with its material, corporeal emergence into existence; to be is to be a body. It is only in reflection that we can distinguish between the existence of the 'I' and its bodily existence. Thus, for Levinas, the materiality of the body, because it is both the condition for the possibility of the virility and freedom of the existent, as well as its encumbrance, does not represent merely a fall into a tomb or prison as Plato thought. The body is the price paid for the sovereignty and freedom of the existent:

The first freedom resultant from the fact that in anonymous existing an existent arises, includes as its price the very finality of the I riveted to itself. This finality of the existent, which constitutes the tragedy of solitude, is materiality.

The 'I' is caught up with its power and freedom and materiality from which it looks to the world for salvation. This evasion in search of salvation from the encumbrance of the body takes two forms. We will consider these under the headings of: (1) the intentionality of representation (intelligibility and light), and (2) the 'intentionality' of enjoyment (nourishment and sincerity), in the following chapter.

## 6 Conclusion

What Levinas has accomplished thus far is to show how a particular

being, an existent, comes to be a particular being out of the anonymity of existence-in-general through the effort of action. This is not a struggle against the anxiety of nothingness — finitude, mortality, and death — but a struggle in the face of the anonymous character of undifferentiated existence experienced in insomnia, laziness, fatigue, etc. Thus, from the beginning, Levinas attempts to situate the genesis of responsible subjectivity in a non-empirical experience of alterity or exteriority which functions as a kind of prod or demand for the existent to be — a pre-conceptual contract with existence inherent in existing from which the existent cannot escape. The establishment of the separateness of the existent in the hypostasis in a reflexive folding back on itself, a halting of the anonymous rustling of existence as the taking up of a position in the present instant, is not yet consciousness but is its ground and foundation. This separateness is realized as being a material body. But separateness, individuation, hypostasis, interiority, being a body, being a one which nevertheless relates reflexively to itself — this is to be alone. The separateness necessary for mastering the il y a leaves the existent stuck with itself. The freedom of hypostasis thus involves both the accomplishment of the power and virility of consciousness as well as the condemnation to solitude in Sartre's sense. Let us now turn to Levinas' understanding of how the existent attempts to evade this burden of its new-found freedom.

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1. Regarding Heidegger's relation to Levinas' task in EE, see Alphonso Lingis' "Translator's Introduction" to CW, pp. VIII-XI.
  2. EE, p. 19 / p. 19.
  3. TO, p. 44 / p. 24.
  4. EE, p. 84 / p. 143.
  5. EE, p. 21 / pp. 25-26; see also "Notes" in DDQV, pp. 231-32.
  6. TO, pp. 46-48 / P. 26.
  7. EE, p. 21 / pp. 25-26; this section was published separately as "I l y a" in Deucalion (Cahiers de Philosophie) 1 (1946): 141-154; see also, TO, p. 46.
  8. EE, p. 58 / p. 94.
  9. TO, p. 49 / p. 28.
  10. Alphonso Lingis, in EE, Trans. Intro., p. 10.
  11. EE, pp. 63-64 / p. 104.
  12. EE, p. 64 / p. 110.
  13. EE, p. 65 / p. 110.
  14. EE, p. 66 / pp. 110-111.
  15. EE, p. 65 / p. 109.
  16. Ibid.
  17. EE, p. 66 / p. 111.
  18. EE, p. 67 / p. 112.
  19. TO, p. 41 / p. 19.
  20. EE, p. 57 / p. 91.
  21. Ibid.
  22. TO, p. 47 / p. 26.
  23. EE, p. 58 / p. 95.
  24. EE, p. 60 / p. 98; cf. p. 84 / p. 143.
  25. Ibid.
  26. See, Carl Jung, "Symbols of Transformation," Collected Works (New

York: Bollingen Foundation, 1956), Vol. V; see also, Levinas, CW, p. 127.

27. Lucien Levy-Bruhl, How Natives Think, trans. L. A. Clare (1910; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

28. EE, p. 67-69 / pp. 115-118; TO, p. 51 / pp. 29-30.

29. EE, pp. 72-73 / pp. 124-125.

30. EE, p. 83 / pp. 141-142.

31. TO, p. 53 / p. 33.

32. EE, p. 82 / pp. 139-140; TO, p. 52 / p. 32; OB, pp. 39ff / pp. 49ff.

33. EE, pp. 82-83 / pp. 140-143.

34. EE, p. 73 / pp. 124-125; TO, p. 52 / p. 31.

35. EE, pp. 27-29 / pp. 37-40.

36. Ibid.

37. EE, p. 25 / p. 33.

38. EE, pp. 24-26 / pp. 32-35.

39. EE, pp. 28-29 / pp. 38-39.

40. EE, p. 29 / p. 39.

41. TI, p. 149 / p. 123; TO, p. 50 / p. 29.

42. EE, p. 28 / p. 38.

43. EE, p. 30 / pp. 42-43.

44. EE, p. 32 / p. 46.

45. EE, p. 34 / p. 48.

46. EE, p. 34 / p. 49.

47. EE, p. 28 / pp. 37-38.

48. EE, p. 24 / p. 31.

49. Ibid.

50. EE, p. 23 / p. 29.

51. EE, pp. 21-22 / pp. 27-28.

52. EE, p. 23 / p. 29.

53. TO, p. 52 / p. 31; cf. p. 54 / p. 34.
54. EE, p. 72 / p. 124; cf. TI, p. 54 / p. 24; TO, p. 54 / p. 35.
55. TI, pp. 53ff / p. 23ff.
56. TO, p. 54 / p. 34.
57. EE, p. 47 / p. 73.
58. TO, p. 55 / p. 36.
59. EE, p. 84 / p. 144.
60. TO, p. 54 / p. 35.
61. TO, p. 55 / p. 35.
62. EE, p. 37 / p. 55.
63. TI, p. 109 / p. 81.
64. EE, p. 73 / p. 125.
65. EE, p. 76 / pp. 130-131.
66. TO, p. 52 / p. 32.
67. TO, p. 53 / p. 33.
68. Ibid.
69. TO, p. 55 / p. 36.
70. TO, p. 54 / p. 34.
71. TO, p. 57 / p. 38.