



Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence

Emmanuel Levinas , Alphonso Lingis (Translator)

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Otherwise than being or beyond essence is a sequel to Levinas's totality and infinity. An immensely challenging and sophisticated work, it is generally considered Levinas's most important contribution to the contemporary debate surrounding the closure of metaphysical discourse, much commented upon by Jacques Derrida. The work contains a fundamentally original theory of the ethical relationship and describes the face-to-face relationship, sensibility, responsibility and speech. The process of the revelation of Being as laid out by modern phenomenological ontology is severely criticized, as the author claims that the ultimate account of these phenomena is not in ontology, the exposition of the meaning of Being, but in a paradoxical discourse, in a skeptical mode, of what is beyond Being.

Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence Details

Date : Published January 1st 1999 by Duquesne University Press (first published 1974)

ISBN : 9780820702995

Author : Emmanuel Levinas , Alphonso Lingis (Translator)

Format : Paperback 205 pages

Genre : Philosophy, Nonfiction, Theory

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From Reader Review Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence for online ebook

Dorian Neerdael says

Franchement, avant de comprendre ça, il faut déjà avoir fait pas mal de chemin. Le livre est sans doute important, et lourd de sens. Cependant, je le déteste. C'est à se demander parfois si Lévinas écrit pour ses lecteurs. Il est trop exigeant. Il demande trop d'attention lors de la lecture. C'est l'Héraclite des temps modernes.

Noah says

Radicalizing his earlier conception of intersubjective responsibility from "mere" asymmetry to a condition of being hostage to the Other, from the welcoming of the always already indigent Other into my home to the feeding of the Other with the bread from my own mouth, from the fraternal to the maternal, Levinas both moves beyond *Totality and Infinity* and problematizes that movement with the introduction of the third party. The primordially (or anarchically) unproblematic relation to the Other, to whom "I have always one response more to give, I have to answer for his very responsibility," becomes problematic with the entry of the third, the relationship with whom serves as "incessant correction of the asymmetry of [the Other's:] proximity." The entry of the third describes the movement from intersubjective responsibility to institutional justice, which is not the negation of metaphysical desire but its triangulation.

Simply put, the most valuable philosophical work I've read.

Eric says

Wrote my dissertation on Levinas, so I know a lot about his life and work but I will not relate that here. His was, and maybe still is, the greatest challenge to metaphysical, ontological thinking, despite the fact that he remained trapped within it. Well, we all do, or there wouldn't be much to say about anything.

"The face of the other" as the locus for a new ethical thinking is brilliant. Infinite obligation to the other is hyperbolic magnificence. His elaboration of time is real twist on phenomenology and existentialism, showing how "the present instant," the unbreachable NOW of total presence, is essentially fractured.

He was a good man, captured by the Nazis and held in a work camp. Henry Blanchot hid his family during this time. His main line of work was Jewish education. He was also a Talmudic scholar of some note and it is fascinating to read his philosophy through the lens of Talmudic reasoning.

If you ever catch the Levinas bug, start at the beginning. His later works deal with the entirety of philosophy and he doesn't take the time to catch the reader up, so you have to know who he's arguing with and why.

Patricia says

i have to believe that levinas was making fun. otherwise, it's just depressing.

Tony says

I had to read this about 5 times before I finally started to get it. This + Heidegger's Mindfulness = truth. And if you don't think they're compatible, you're not reading closely or liberally enough.

Amy says

perhaps if my brain was big enough to comprehend the vastness of this book, i would have enjoyed it more (rather than throw it against the wall). but still, it was rather a triumph to complete.

Alex Obrigewitsch says

I am speechless, and yet I have so much to say. A masterwork, in ways, that inaugurates a way of thinking that can have no real beginning or end.

Dare I say it is even better than *Totality and Infinity*?

I will return to this work time and again, I know already.

Have I said too much? Have I said anything at all?

Or is it not about the said, but rather the saying, and what it says (and what remains unsaid)?

Zachary Taylor says

In 1964, Jacques Derrida published what would become one of his most influential early essays, “Violence and Metaphysics,” in which he both expressed profound sympathy with and objections to Emmanuel Levinas’s first major work, *Totality and Infinity*, published earlier in 1961. On the one hand, Derrida praises Levinas’s attempt “to be understood from within a recourse to experience itself. Experience itself and that which is most irreducible to experience” (VM 83). Levinas’s ethics, he observes, relies upon a so-called metaphysics established in interpersonal relation and discourse, “a metaphysics that Levinas seeks to raise up from its subordinate position and whose concept he seeks to restore in opposition to the entire tradition derived from Aristotle” (VM 83). On the other hand, Derrida points out that despite Levinas’s effort to move beyond the “Greek” philosophical discourse of traditional metaphysics with discourse he calls “prophetic exultation,” Levinas, a Jewish philosopher, must nevertheless revert to Greek terms and concepts; his attempt to describe absolute alterity (the Other, whom I encounter in ethical relation) beyond the totality of all there is necessarily—and contra Levinas’s own insistence—falls back into and relies upon the philosophical discourse of the Same, or totality, rather than the infinite transcendence manifested by the Other. Thus, Derrida concludes (in the words of Diane Perpich, one of his current expositors), “alterity in Levinas’s sense requires that exteriority be ‘crossed out’ as soon as it is invoked, since it implies a relative and not an absolute alterity—an exteriority that maintains itself by reference to and in relation to an interiority, and vice versa” (EEI 66). Put simply, Derrida asserts that Levinas fails to demonstrate how the Other can liberate metaphysics from Greek universalism, that his “essay on exteriority” (the subtitle of *Totality and Infinity*) in fact demonstrates that “it is necessary to think *true* exteriority as non-*exteriority*, that is, still by means of the Inside-Outside structure and by spatial metaphor; and that it is necessary still to inhabit the metaphor in

ruins, to dress oneself in tradition's shreds and the devil's patches" (VM 112). The tradition's shreds and the devil's patches—Derrida's is a severe critique.

While it is impossible to prove that *Otherwise Than Being, or Beyond Essence*, first published in 1974, is first and foremost a response to Derrida's criticisms, Levinas's second major philosophical work certainly addresses many of Derrida's objections. *Otherwise Than Being* seeks to move entirely beyond the terms and concepts of traditional Greek philosophy which, Levinas says, represent *le dit*, *the said*. The "lived time which allows a phenomenon to appear," memory, recollection, and representation, thematization and conceptualization, even words themselves—these are all part of *le dit*, and thereby coincident with totality, with *être*, with "Greek" philosophy (37). One of the primary theses of *Otherwise Than Being* is to show how *le dit* is conditioned by and dependent upon *le dire*, typically translated as *the saying*. *Le dire*, we are told, is "unrepresentable, immemorial, pre-historical . . . the impossibility of the dispersion of time to assemble itself in the present, the insurmountable diachrony of time, a beyond the said" (38). The concepts of *le dire* are, by definition, not concepts; one cannot thematize the movements of *le dire* insofar as they resist temporalization in predicative statements. Or rather, as soon as one does thematize such movements, as Levinas must in the written text of his book, *le dire* is subsumed in *le dit* and only the trace of *le dire* remains in *le dit*. The task, then, is "to awaken in *le dit* *le dire* which is absorbed" (43); that is, to unsay what has been said "in order to thus extract *the otherwise than being*" (7).

This task is the thrust of Levinas's philosophical project in *Otherwise Than Being*, and he is upfront with the obstacles it poses, many of which Derrida mentions in "Violence and Metaphysics": "Can this *saying* and this *being unsaid* be assembled, can they be at the same time?" Levinas asks in his introductory chapter. He immediately recoils from this question and notes that even the desire for synchronization is a retreat into *le dit*. Thus, while his attempt to philosophize what cannot be philosophized appears utterly futile, the inescapable tension constitutive of Levinas's discursive effort is, I think, exactly the point. Levinas's attempt to establish ethics as first philosophy is parallel to his effort to unsay the said of Greek philosophy, and both efforts convey "the desire for the possession of unshakable normative principles or an ethical *fundamentum*" beyond metaphysics, the traditional philosophical basis for all ethics (*EEI* 77). Nevertheless, as Levinas makes clear over and over in *Otherwise Than Being*, this effort is doomed from the start, since the search for an ethical *fundamentum* leads one back into the totality of Greek philosophy where the search must start anew. Levinas's philosophy is then "the performance of the ethical life, . . . the enactment of our ethical situation" (*EEI* 77). On this interpretation, ethics—coincident with *le dire* on Levinas's view—is never quite secure, and every attempt to wrestle it down to first principles from which we can derive moral theories fails. After all, how can we ever properly justify our actions? There are always and always will be impossible ethical knots that no Alexander can cut. Yet I must justify myself to the other person, and my responsibility to answer the Other's demand makes the search for ethics perpetually necessary. We cannot do without ethics, however elusive it may be.

While the terms Levinas uses in *Otherwise Than Being* differ somewhat from those he employs in *Totality and Infinity*, the basic structure of transcendence remains in place. Here, *le dire* (synonymous with transcendence, infinity, and ethics) still manifests in the face-to-face encounter with the Other, the relation that founds rationality and thus makes possible "Greek" philosophical discourse. Yet whereas Levinas primarily describes the Other in *Totality and Infinity* (at least in the sections devoted to the ethical encounter; the subject does feature prominently in the first parts of *Totality and Infinity*'s "plot"), he mostly focuses on the subject, the I, in *Otherwise Than Being*, and in particular *who I am* in responsibility to the Other. In 1961, Levinas was adamant that the Other solicits my attention, that she disrupts my self-absorbed interaction with a world whose objects I use and enjoy; here, in 1974, he shows how my response to the Other constitutes me as an ethical subject just as it puts me in infinite and asymmetrical responsibility to the other person. Whereas the Other, the call, Desire, and transcendence are some of the major themes in the earlier text, responsibility, subjectivity, proximity, sensibility, and most importantly, substitution, are the critical themes here. For the rest of this review, I will focus specifically on Levinas's notion of substitution, out of which the rest of the book developed in the years between 1968 and 1974.

“Substitution” was, in fact, the name of an essay published in 1968 which inspired *Otherwise Than Being*. In its simplest formulation, substitution captures how I am constituted as an ethical subject in my unique responsibility for the other person; more specifically, I am responsible even for other person’s death, such that a truly ethical response to the Other’s call requires my death in the place of the Other. Substitution thus describes *who I am* and *what I should do* as an ethically constituted subject. Substitution—to be disinterested, to be responsible, to be unequivocally for another person (the one-for-another vs. the for-itself)—is therefore not an act; it is quite simply to be oneself. The self is *sub-jectum*, subjected wholly to the Other, and in this subjection, I “find” my subjectivity and individuation, I am awakened to *who I am*. For Levinas, such individuation is constitutive of and circumscribed to substitution: “Responsibility for another,” Levinas explains, “is not an accident that happens to a subject, but precedes essence in it, has not awaited freedom, in which a commitment to another would have been made” (114). Substitution is a non-choice that precedes all freedom, and insofar as I am responsible in substitution prior to the formation of an identity to which I can lay claim, I always stand accused—I must always justify myself in responsible relation to the other person. Simply put, in the words of Paul Celan, whom Levinas quotes at the start of his chapter on substitution in *Otherwise Than Being*, “I am you, when I am I” (99). We can render Celan’s statement somewhat differently to say, only when I am for another, am I really the “I” I *should* be. To be responsible to another person, to substitute oneself for the other person, to be accused, obsessed, persecuted, and subjected, all terms Levinas uses to describe substitution—this is not to say that I am responsible “before” I am an “I” in a literal, temporal sense, but that my relationship with the other person matters before I am who I should be, thus before my capacity to think and act as an responsible subject.

Substitution is only one of a constellation of new themes Levinas introduces in *Otherwise Than Being*. The second most important theme is politics, or justice, which builds upon a very short discussion of “the third party” in *Totality and Infinity*. Unfortunately, a full discussion of politics exceeds the scope of this review. Yet with politics, just as with the notions of *le dire* and *le dit*, Levinas responds to some of the most powerful critiques of his philosophy. In this case, to those who say that ethics as construed by Levinas is not ethics at all—that, in fact, his description of the ethical is so far removed from our ordinary sense of what we owe each other that what Levinas says is ethical may well be *unethical*—Levinas demonstrates how politics, i.e. the assessment and comparison of responsibilities in a world where there are many others, is bound up with his view of the ethical, which he claims is the foundation or the source of all justice. As then is clear, I hope, *Otherwise Than Being* is a momentous text that builds upon, departs from, and converses with *Totality and Infinity*. Like its predecessor, it represents a seminal moment in twentieth century philosophy, and whether or not one subscribes to its distinct vision of the ethical, one can appreciate the creativity with which Levinas thinks, particularly in response to Derrida. Battered, confused, disillusioned, and frustrated, many readers like me nevertheless find themselves inspired and uplifted by Levinas’s defense of human subjectivity, especially by his insistent, albeit sympathetic reply to the skeptic that we are not, contra skepticism, “duped by morality.” Rather, we must always look for it.

Asia says

I don't think "I really liked it" is a proper way of describing my attitude towards this book. It is probably one of the most important books and, certainly, the most difficult book in my reading history (and, mind you, I've read few of Lacan's texts as well). It takes a lot of patience and self-discipline to get to the end, but when you finish you truly feel victorious. Fortunately for me (I am not particularly patient or disciplined), I had someone to read this book with and I deeply believe it is a way to go. My friend and I, we were meeting in various cafes to discuss the ideas that Levinas tries to develop. Not only did it give me a feeling that I wasn't alone in my confusion and lack of understanding, but it actually helped to develop quite exciting interpretations and find a way to grasp Levinas's meandering thought.

I think this book is a must for those interested in ethics. The basis of Levinas's ethics is an encounter with the other. Out of this encounter, the subject emerges as responsible beyond its capabilities. I wouldn't like to summarize the book because I still don't feel that familiar with the concepts. I guess it takes more hours of serious study to fully embrace and comprehend this philosophy.

It is also a useful read for literature and literary theory students. The notions of "the said" and "the saying," which he develops carefully, might be particularly interesting.

If you are not into ethics or literature, you might want to read it just because it's a pretty puzzling way of thinking, a new system through which you can perceive the world differently. It's a great exercise for both intellect and will. And, to be honest, sometimes it's just breathtakingly beautiful.
