

LEVINAS AND THE TRIPLE CRITIQUE OF HEIDEGGER

Graham Harman

As twentieth century philosophy fades into the distance, Martin Heidegger seems to be standing the test of time. His stature in continental philosophy is beyond question, and those French thinkers who avoid his influence most noticeably (such as Alain Badiou and Gilles Deleuze) are often difficult for precisely this reason, since it is Heidegger who has shaped our vision of philosophy more than anyone else. Even analytic philosophers have begun to find useful insights in Heidegger's works, while no analytic thinker has a comparable influence in the other direction—not even Wittgenstein. As the dust settles on the past hundred years of philosophy, it is Heidegger who looms as the ancestor whose influence we most need to absorb and resist.

No one has seen this more clearly than Emmanuel Levinas. His claim that we must leave the *climate* of Heideggerian philosophy, and that we cannot do so by returning to a philosophy that would be pre-Heideggerian, strikes me as definitive. Nor does Levinas offer this statement as merely a vague program: in my view, he has done more than anyone else to move us into the post-Heideggerian climate that he recommends. In the works of Levinas, the lasting breakthroughs of Husserlian phenomenology are present in easily recognizable form, even if played in a strange new key. He grapples with Heidegger's question of being and his famous tool-analysis, reworking them in ways their author never attempted. Levinas does this along two separate paths. First and most famously, he senses the lack of any ethical philosophy in Heidegger, and also identifies a new space for such an ethics: the famous alterity or exteriority of the other. In this way Heidegger is challenged from above, with an appeal to the good beyond being. In a second and less prominent sense, Levinas challenges Heidegger from beneath, with his concepts of enjoyment and the elemental. While Heidegger submits all objects to a relational system of tools serving a series of purposes, Levinas objects to this form of holism. Entities are not simply dissolved in some global system

of purposes, but close off in themselves, with a sort of inviolable integrity apart from all networks or functions. Humans always stand somewhere in particular, bathing in the material reality of wind, water, and stars, not to mention hammers and cigarettes, none of them entirely used up by their assignment to wider purposes. It is often forgotten that this second criticism of Heidegger is the basis for the first: for in Totality and Infinity, it is "separation" that paves the way for exteriority and transcendence.¹

In this article, I will claim that there is also a third critique of Heidegger to be found in Levinas, one more closely related to the second than to the first. As Alphonso Lingis has lucidly observed,² Levinas gives us a new definition of individual substance without relapsing into the traditional substance discredited by Heidegger's shifting system of tools. For Levinas, specific things are not just ontic debris to be dissolved in a mighty ethical Other, but neither are they just formless elements such as water or clouds. Things are substances, closed off in themselves even while permeated by what lies beyond them. If metaphysics for Levinas is inconceivable without the command of the Other, it is also unthinkable without the integrity and resistance of specific, autonomous entities. Heidegger misses the ethical moment, but perhaps more fatefully, he also misses the unyielding autonomy of specific objects. While Heidegger is quick to dismiss drums, houses, and tea plantations as "ontic," Levinas glimpses the metaphysical dimension of particular things. My one criticism of the Levinasian approach is that it remains too human-centered, too much in the shadow of Kant's Copernican Revolution. Things may hide behind their contours in substantial plenitude, resisting human effort, but Levinas also seems to grant them independence only when humans are on the scene to feel resistance. A genuine, full-blown metaphysics would also need to account for the causal interaction of substances even when no humans are anywhere in the vicinity. The separation and exte-

riority found in Levinasian metaphysics should not be seen just as new categories of human experience, but should be injected into reality as a whole—even in pure inanimate collisions between rocks and grains of salt. Only in this way do we make a clean break with the Heideggerian climate, where being and Dasein always come as a pair. Against Heidegger's claims, while it may be true that being needs beings, it does not need human Dasein at all. In this respect Levinas lays the groundwork for a strange new form of realism, without taking the final step of severing concrete entities from their dependence on human being.

Let's now take a closer look at the three ways that Levinas overcomes his strategic enemy—totality. What Levinas most abhors is the model of the world as a totalized system, each thing defined by its relations to the others. If Levinas has one original idea in metaphysics, it is this: the world is not a system, but is split up into dignified local zones that demand to be taken seriously. And we must remember that Levinas does not oppose totality only (1) with the infinity that lies beyond it, but also (2) with the elemental enjoyment that lies beneath it, and (3) the kingdom of substances that lie directly within it and prevent totality from gaining a foothold in the first place. Although *Totality and Infinity* is the title of his most famous book, it could just as well be phrased as *Totality and Separation*, *Totality and Enjoyment*, or *Totality and Substance*. Or rather, the book could easily have been designed with these as the titles of three separate chapters.

1. Separation

The enemy is totality, and another name for totality is war. For Levinas, the metaphor of war means not just that each thing struggles to impose its will on the others, but also that each loses its identity in this struggle, fully deployed without reserve in all the conflicts and relations with its neighbors. As he puts it, the “black light [of war is] . . . a casting into movement of beings hitherto anchored in their identity . . . by an objective order from which there is no escape. The trial by force is the test of the real.” More than this, war makes things “play roles in which they no longer identify themselves, making them betray not only commitments but also their own substance. . . . War

does not manifest exteriority and the other as other; it destroys the identity of the same.”³ And finally, “individuals are reduced to being bearers of forces that command them unbeknown to themselves. The meaning of individuals (invisible outside of this totality) is derived from the totality. . . . For the ultimate meaning alone counts; the last act alone changes beings into themselves.”⁴ If we take the word “war” in its literal sense, these statements are certainly true for the Blitzkrieg through Poland and the Ardennes, the struggles at Dunkirk and Normandy, and all the various massacres and deportations that touched the Levinas family to no small degree. Yet the primary target of these anti-war passages is not the Nazi war-machine, but the philosophy of Heidegger, whose tool-analysis presents the world as a system of entities that gain meaning only in relation to a totality of purposes. All beings are assigned to the full system of beings, and nothing can be viewed as an independent substance. For Heidegger, autonomous or separate things exterior to the whole of meaning could only be present-at-hand entities, and his contempt for presence is clearly central to his philosophy.

Surely Heidegger must have realized that we deal with individual cigarettes and loaves of bread, and that such objects are not entirely used up in a totality of meaning. But this “surely” is irrelevant in judging any philosopher—Parmenides must surely have realized that our perceptions are filled with entities in motion, yet this did not prevent him from treating them dismissively. The question is not what philosophers “must have known,” but only what they openly honored and welcomed into their thinking. And it is Levinas, not Heidegger, who makes sufficient room in philosophy for individual beings such as wood, silk, or apples. In his own words, “the handling and utilization of tools, the recourse to all the instrumental gear of a life, whether to fabricate tools or to render things accessible, concludes in enjoyment . . . the lighter to the cigarette one smokes, the fork to the food, the cup to the lips.”⁵ Our world is not a unified totality of objects plugged into other objects, and so forth without end. Instead, we live amidst a carnival of independent zones, districts, and termini, and explore a world without fissures or gaps,⁶ where the meaningless hum of insects and the

feel of cotton garments on our skin is not dissolved into some global empire of references. We live in a milieu or medium, not in a tool-system.⁷ In this sense, the things are partly separated from totality, but also partly immersed in it. Levinas has no wish to return to an old-fashioned theory of natural lumps of substance whose relations would only be accidental. He does not deny the system of tools; he merely insists that the tool-system is riddled with gaps and tropical islands where individual things take shape for our enjoyment.

While this friendly critique of Heidegger is compelling enough, two immediate objections come to mind. The first is that Levinas is ambiguous as to just what it is that resists the tool-system. Sometimes he says it is individual entities such as “fine cars” or “fine cigarette lighters,” which we encounter as autonomous things to be touched and enjoyed quite apart from their ultimate meaning. But just as often, he appeals to a formless elemental realm preceding any condensation into definite shapes. Separation is defined as sensibility, and Levinas praises the senses as naïve or sincere only in those passages when they do not split the world into distinct objects. For Levinas, objects always lie partly beyond the sensible.

Second, and more importantly, Levinas tends to reserve to human consciousness alone the right to break the totality of the world into separate zones of enjoyment. This is already explicit in his brilliant 1948 treatise *Existence and Existents*, where only the human being is able to hypostatize the anonymous rumble of the *il y a*, just as Anaxagoras only allowed *nous* (mind) to break the formless *apeiron* into pieces.⁸ While Heidegger posits *Dasein* as what turns the world into a system of references, Levinas moves in the reverse direction. The world-in-itself, for him, is called system, totality, or *war*, and only human being gains a foothold or builds a home amidst the global blur of systematic relations. As Levinas still claims in *Totality and Infinity* more than a decade later, it is the psychism that resists totality: *psyche* or *cogito* are what generate separation (and he makes no mention here of animal psyches). “The separation of the Same is produced in the form of an inner life, a psychism. The psychism constitutes an event in being . . . it is already a way of being, resistance to the totality.”⁹ Then it is neither wind and water, nor

pitchforks, towers, and windmills that give us separation, but only the human being who happens to be experiencing these things. In a word, hypostasis means people. Without people, there would be nothing but totality, nothing but *apeiron*, a pure insomnia without insomniacs.

2. Exteriority

Without forgetting these criticisms, let’s consider again the positive side of what Levinas has shown. Things are separated from the global tool-system, which is riddled with comforts and resting-stations. As a description of enjoyment, Levinas uses the provocative term *atheism*, since enjoyment is sincerely occupied with whatever it now enjoys, and pays no attention to the beyond. But such a distinction cannot entirely be maintained. As he puts it: “the exteriority of a being is inscribed in its essence.”¹⁰ Stated differently, “[the] ‘beyond’ of the totality and objective experience is . . . not to be described in purely negative fashion. It is reflected within the totality and history, within experience.”¹¹

In other words, the separation by which enjoyment is cut off from the whole is never complete; even the most terrestrial crust of bread is bathed in light from beyond. And it is important never to forget that both separation and exteriority are ways in which the totality of the world is interrupted with gaps. Levinas begins by insisting that enjoyment and the elemental are ways of breaking up Heidegger’s unified tool-empire. But even if the global system of equipment is already shattered into fragments by enjoyment, there is the danger that each fragment might represent a new sort of micro-totality, visible at a glance and entirely subsumed within human consciousness. In some ways this is the predicament of Husserl’s phenomenology, which according to Levinas turns the given into “an exteriority surrendering in clarity and without immodesty its whole being to thought. . . . [Such] clarity is the disappearance of what could shock.”¹² By contrast, Levinas holds that “consciousness . . . does not consist in equaling being with representation . . . but rather in overflowing this play of lights—this phenomenology—and in accomplishing *events* whose ultimate signification . . . does not lie in disclosing.”¹³ The events of the

world are never fully deployed before our eyes, which would simply make them a new kind of totality even if broken into pieces—a totality of all the things as grasped by me. Instead, all our thoughts and actions aim at an exterior realm of absolute otherness.

The separation of enjoyment and the elemental does not, for Levinas, entail their finitude. Things are not projected against a background of nothingness, but open onto the infinite—not as some ethereal realm located across a Platonic *chorismos*, but as an infinity that animates enjoyment from within. As he puts it, “what is *essential* to created existence is its separation with regard to the Infinite. This separation is not simply a negation. Accomplished as psychism, it precisely opens upon the idea of infinity.”¹⁴ Let’s ignore the phrase “accomplished as psychism,” since I will return to this issue shortly. The key for now is that separation is never entirely closed off, which would simply give us a new totality: a total set of finite bread, knives, orphans, and widows as opposed to a global tool-system, but a totality nonetheless. When Socrates denies that justice means helping one’s friends and hurting one’s enemies, his first step is to distinguish between the true and the apparent friend.¹⁵ This entails that the friend, or anything else, is not exhausted by its current apparent state of affairs, and that some deeper reality lies behind it. Hence the claim of Levinas that his philosophy is diametrically opposed to Spinozism,¹⁶ now at its height of prestige in continental philosophy thanks to Deleuze and others, but guilty now as ever of reducing things to their current deployment in the world, free of any excess or potentiality. This is what Levinas means when he says that “the Place of the Good above every essence is the most profound teaching, not of theology, but of philosophy.”¹⁷ Spinoza like Heidegger leaves no place for the good above every systematic totality. This association of transcendence with the good leads Levinas to link it to ethics,¹⁸ and even to God.¹⁹ But this may be aiming needlessly high, and needlessly quickly. As Lingis has shown in *The Imperative*, there is something like an ethical dimension even in the merest imperative to focus our eyes a certain way to see a certain object correctly, or to treat specific objects in specific ways.²⁰ Not all angles and distances for viewing the Cathedral

of Chartres are equally valid, since only some vantage points fully bring out the greatness of the Cathedral. Likewise, not all speeds of consuming gourmet chocolates or prize-winning wines are optimal for bringing out the true flavor of these items. It is impossible for separation to wall off perceptions in themselves. We are always aiming beyond those perceptions, toward the unified objects lying beneath them.

We now return to the theme of the “psychism.” Here we find the most dubious step taken by Levinas. On the one hand, it is true that he makes the following remark about intentionality, and in a critical spirit: “the object is converted into an event of the subject. Light, the element of knowledge, makes all that we encounter be ours.”²¹ But although he counters the reign of light with an infinity that can never be made present, he also strangely holds that the Infinite exists only as a correlate of thought. For Levinas, even if infinity is never absent, it is always produced. And what produces it is a human subject, the only thing in the world capable of hypostatizing individual zones from amidst the rumbling, insomniac totality of the *il y a*. As he puts it in the preface to *Totality and Infinity*: “the idea of infinity is the mode of being, the infinition, of infinity. Infinity does not first exist, and then reveal itself. Its infinition is produced as revelation, as a positing of its idea in me.”²² He repeats this point at the close of the book, telling us that transcendence “concerns a *being* which is revealed in a face. . . . Transcendence is the transcendence of an I. Only an I can respond to the injunction of a face.”²³ This leaves us with the following picture of the world. The world is not entirely exhausted in warfare, but split up into countless discrete zones of domestic peace, even if temporary ones. The things as we perceive them are separate, both from the system of tools and from the anonymous rumble of being as a whole. But these separate things would degenerate into a more fragmented form of totality if they existed only in the unified light that bathes them. Hence, along with separation, things have exteriority—an aspect that lies beyond their position in the world as we know it. I am happy to endorse this ubiquitous interplay of separation and exteriority in all the things of the world. What I am not happy to endorse is the further notion

that only human beings are able to break the totality into fragments, or that only humans bathe in the element and bow before the face of the Other. In fact, I believe that Levinas is even more powerful as a philosopher of substance than as a philosopher of ethics. For even in his own thinking, it is only individual substance that rebels against totality in both directions.

3. Substance

It is surprising that so little attention has been paid to the concept of substance in Levinas, since it is the one notion that contains both methods by which Levinas overcomes Heidegger's position. If enjoyment is the space of non-finality and immediacy, it is not just wind and water, but always has definite contours; after all, the enjoyment of bread, sunlight, cigarettes, and kisses are all different kinds of enjoyment. Enjoyment, then, is always just the surface configuration of some individual substance. The same is true for exteriority, also known as alterity. If things cannot exist without being permeated by Infinity, the same holds true in reverse—after all, Levinas claims that the Infinite is not a preexistent monolith or *apeiron*, but instead can only be produced in some specific manifestation. Neither separated enjoyment nor exterior alterity ever exist in isolation. These two moments are always moments of some specific thing.

Levinas tells us that action entails “a certain respect for objects.”²⁴ Such respect is said to be missing in Heidegger, who underestimates the objectivity of objects,²⁵ since his tool-system enslaves all objects to a process which “*by essence* [consists] in proceeding to a term, in coming to an end. But the outcome is the point at which every signification is precisely lost. . . . The means themselves lose their signification in the outcome.”²⁶ Turning against this Heideggerian conception, the more object-oriented Levinas reports that things “are not entirely absorbed in their form; they . . . stand out in themselves, breaking through, rending their forms, are not resolved into the relations that link them up to the totality. . . . The thing is always an opacity, a resistance, an ugliness.”²⁷ They are not imaginary substrates that unify supposed bundles of qualities that alone are accessible to the mind. On the contrary, sensible qualities have meaning only with respect to the

things: “the sensible quality already clings to a substance.”²⁸ The things are manifested in enjoyment, but never reducible to it. For “substantiality . . . does not lie in the sensible nature of things, since sensibility coincides with enjoyment . . . without substantive, a pure quality, a quality without support. . . . The substantiality of a thing lies in its solidity, offering itself to the hand which takes and takes away.”²⁹

Few philosophers have ever given such beautiful descriptions of particular substances as Levinas. To give just one instance: “Transformations occur to things which remain the same: the stone crumbles but remains the same stone; I rediscover my pen and armchair the same; it is in the selfsame palace of Louis XIV that the Treaty of Versailles was signed; the same train is the train that leaves at the same hour.”³⁰ Admittedly, he also seems to back away from this strange realism in two additional passages: “the world of *perception* is thus a world where things have identity,” and “an earth inhabited by men endowed with *language* is peopled with stable things.”³¹ Yet it is difficult to see how the depth of substance could be produced by perception or language. Even Levinas tells us that the alterity of a thing is not exhausted in its visible form. When he reminds us that “one can melt the metal of things to make new objects of them, utilize the wood of a box to make a table out of it by chopping, sawing, planning,”³² this is clearly not a linguistic exercise. “The depth of the thing can have no other meaning than that of its matter. . . . The darkness of matter would denote the state of a being that precisely has no façade.”³³ But most importantly of all, Levinas does not offer us a frozen dualism with mysterious matter pitted against shiny visible form. There turns out to be an infinite regress of substance and façade, one tangled into another endlessly, with objects shifting constantly (and simultaneously) between their form-roles and matter-roles. As we read in a stunning passage:

Things present themselves as solids with contours clearly delimited. Along with tables, chairs, envelopes, notebooks, pens—fabricated things—stones, grains of salt, clumps of earth, icicles, apples are things. . . . One thing is distinct from another because an interval separates them. But a part of a thing is in turn a thing: the back, the leg of the chair, for example. *But also*

*any fragment of the leg is a thing, even if it does not constitute one of its articulations—everything one can detach and remove from it.*³⁴

This appeal to an endless chain of things, one contained inside another, is important for a very specific reason. Namely, it implies a cosmos with more than the usual two layers. For the leg of a chair, or fragments of the leg, do not become parts of the thing only when we happen to be looking at them. They must always be there, always supporting the thing as a whole. But this implies that the difference between exterior depth and sensible particularity is not something rooted solely in human reality—as though human consciousness were a unique tear in the fabric of an otherwise totalized cosmos. The leg of a chair is not “totalized” by the chair any more than the chair is totalized by its assignment to purposes in Heidegger’s tool-system.

This raises the question of why Levinas is so committed to giving all power of rupture and hypostasis to the “I,” the human self, and language. For humans, individual substances are always a strange interplay of warm sensible façades and opaque cores that can be cut or melted. But the same must hold true even for things when we consider them as parts or wholes apart from all human involvement. The chair is able to stand only because its legs have a leg-form, rigid and reliable, pointing at right angles into the floor, regardless of the quality of their material. But imagine that one of the legs were made of rotting wood—its rotten state currently irrelevant to the standing of the chair, but eventually *very* relevant when the chair topples to the floor centuries after being abandoned, seen and heard by no one. “Language” and “the self” have nothing to do with this kind of situation. Instead, it is a more general question of substances interacting with

one another: confronting each other as forms or façades, but mutually dependent on their dark inner realities where secret conspiracies are always being hatched.

Despite pushing us to this point, Levinas shies away from drawing any conclusions about inanimate matter. In this respect he stands clearly within the phenomenological tradition that he so greatly honors—a tradition founded precisely to counter the reign of scientific naturalism. Rather than letting the science of inanimate impact explain the sounds of violins and the odor of baked potatoes, phenomenology wants us to stay on the plane of human experience. While this serves wonderfully to prevent false reductionism, it concedes too much through its tacit agreement that naturalism gives an adequate explanation of what happens when a rock slams into the leg of a table. This is usually regarded as nothing more than the collision of one hard solid with another, a dull mechanical process best measured in laboratories and left to physicists. But if Levinas is correct, the interaction between substances is never quite as boring as this. As he tells us in a brilliant phrase, “a thing exists in the midst of its wastes.”³⁵ This is not merely a statement about human perception, but a more general claim about how the substance of a rock or table hide behind their sensible contours, which cling to these individual substances like frost to windows or rust to shovels. Thus, when one inanimate object encounters another, we do not have a blind mechanical collision, but one substance in the midst of its wastes encountering another in the midst of its wastes. How each of these objects penetrates the wastes of other objects to engage in direct contact is a philosophical problem that Levinas never openly formulates, but which his own thinking invites us to consider.

ENDNOTES

1. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1991).
2. Alphonso Lingis, “A Phenomenology of Substances,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 71 (1997): 505–22.
3. *Totality and Infinity*, 21.
4. *Ibid.*, 21–22.
5. *Ibid.*, 133.
6. *Ibid.*, 135.
7. *Ibid.*, 130.
8. Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1948).
9. *Totality and Infinity*, 54.
10. *Ibid.*, 196.

PHILOSOPHY TODAY

11. Ibid., 23.
12. Ibid., 124.
13. Ibid., 27–28.
14. Ibid., 150. Italics added.
15. Plato, *Republic*, Book I.
16. *Totality and Infinity*, 105.
17. Ibid., 103.
18. Ibid., 174.
19. Ibid., 79.
20. Alphonso Lingis, *The Imperative* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1998.)
21. *Totality and Infinity*, 274.
22. Ibid., 26.
23. Ibid., 305. Italics added.
24. Ibid., 82.
25. Ibid., 94.
26. Ibid. 94–95.
27. Ibid., 74.
28. Ibid., 137.
29. Ibid., 161.
30. Ibid., 139.
31. Ibid., italics added in both sentences.
32. Ibid., 192.
33. Ibid., 192–93.
34. Ibid., 160. Italics added.
35. Ibid., 139.

American University in Cairo, Cairo, Egypt