Face to face with Levinas

edited by Richard A. Cohen.

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Contents

Preface

Levinas has written his own brief intellectual bibliography, "Signature."[1] His biography, complete up to 1981, can be found in *Emmanuel Levinas* by Roger Burggraeve.[2]

The present collection, however, does not require any previous knowledge of Levinas. Indeed, the interview with Levinas included in it, conducted by Richard Kearney, is an excellent summary review of his philosophy. The authors who have contributed to this collection know Levinas' work thoroughly: their articles come from many years' meditation upon it.

Much is at stake in such meditations and in their fruits. Taking up philosophy's central tradition, Levinas raises anew the question of the limits and nature of knowledge, the question of the status of thought itself. What is unique about Levinas' answer is that it binds thought not in the name of the *true*, but in the name of the *good*. Levinas does not demand that thought be more rigorous or more in tune with being, but that it be more thoughtful; heedful of the social, and therefore moral, conditions that govern it. Levinas demands that thought be humble.

Levinas' response to the end of metaphysics is not Nietzsche's "pandemonium of free spirits," but a call to maturation. Reasonableness requires greater responsibilities than were dreamed of by *ratio*. Levinas insists on these greater responsibilities, within and beyond reason. The articles in this collection are challenged by this profound insistence, seduced by its force, yet not ready to succumb without protest. In this intellectual hesitation, they articulate a critical confrontation. Bound yet free, they are deep responses.

Putting this collection together has required much generosity from many people. I am especially grateful to all the contributors

who have so generously given of their thought, and also to the translators who have contributed their time and effort to a trying task. I would like to thank Carol Bresnock and Diane Brunamonti of Penn State at Scranton for typing many parts of the manuscript. I would like to thank Alphonso Lingis and Edith Wyschogrod, who from the start — and all along — have encouraged me to do this project. The entire collection is a gift of gratitude for Levinas' work, which inspires it throughout.

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Notes

1. Levinas, "Signature," ed. and annotated by Adriaan Peperzak, trans. M.E. Petrisko, *Research in Phenomenology* VIII, 1978, 175–189.

2. Roger Burggraeve, *Emmanuel Levinas*, The Center for Metaphysics and Philosophy of God, Institute of Philosophy, Kardinaal Mercierplein 2, 3000, Louvain, Bergium, 1982.

Acknowledgments

Key to Abbreviations of Levinas' Texts

DEE/EE	*De l'existent à l'existence* (Paris: Fontaine, 1947)/ *Existence and Existents*, trans. by A. Lingis (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1978).
DEHH	*En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*, 2d ed. (Paris: Vrin, 1967).
TeI/TI	*Totalité et Infini* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1961)/ *Totality and Infinity* trans. by A. Lingis (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1969; Pittsburgh: Duquesne, 1969).
DL DL (2d)	*Difficile Liberté* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1963; 2d enlarged and revised ed. 1976).
QLT	*Quatre lectures talmudiques* (Paris: Minuit, 1968).
HAH	*Humanisme de l'autre homme* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1972).
AEAE/OBBE	*Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1974)/ *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. by A. Lingis (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1981).

Additional abbreviations are indicated as used in separate articles.

RICHARD A. COHEN

Introduction

Is an ethical philosophy primarily philosophical, a true discourse that happens to be about moral phenomena? Or is such a philosophy primarily ethical, an edifying discourse designed to stimulate good behavior, an exhortation, instruction or prescription rather than an explanation, description or denotation? Knowing that the drowning child must be saved, even when coupled with knowing how to save the child, is not the same as saving the child, unless knowing and doing are synonymous, which in our world they are not. For Levinas goodness comes first. His philosophy aims to pronounce this goodness, to articulate and emphasize it, and thus to realign its relation to the true. His thought is not simply an articulation, but a peculiar ethical exacerbation of language which bends the true to the good.

The issue between the true and the good is one of priority. Each claims absolute priority. If truth is primary then the criteria of epistemology, of cognition and knowledge, take precedence over moral standards. Knowledge interests dominate. Truth absorbs and transforms goodness to its own purposes, in more or less subtle ways, even when it claims not to. Aristotle and Hegel discover that the highest good ultimately surpasses the responsibilities and duties of citizenship, friendship and love. For these thinkers what is most needful is for thought to think itself. Such thought, however (and typically), *includes* citizenship, love, and the other *less exalted* human activities and relations, which are oriented toward and by

knowledge. Today, to take another example, one often hears scientists lay claim to a "value-free" language, that is to say, to a language beholden only to itself, to its own criteria. The deconstruction inaugurated by Derrida, too — so apparently at odds with science as with all naivité — is only a more recent instance in a long tradition of the self-absorption of knowledge.

But if the good were somehow primary in philosophy and life, and the standards of ethics took precedence over those of epistemology, then knowledge, for its part, would apparently be legitimately outraged. Is one not justified in fearing that the quest for truth would be hampered by moral scruples? Would it not be shackled by the nonfreedom of moral obedience? In the final account knowledge cannot distinguish moral scruple from tyranny or from cowardice; it has yet to learn one true morality, yet to see its proofs. In place of universal truth, or the quest for universal truth, one would have instead the contending particularities and vagaries of history: class truths, female truths, Islamic truths, and so on, each claiming moral superiority in a war of all against all.

Epistemology and ethics only seem able to distort one another unrecognizably.

But is the opposition of ethics and epistemology an opposition of two systems on the same plane? Truth is not the other of ethics in the same sense that goodness is the other of epistemology. The false is the other of the true; evil is the other of good. How are true, false, good, and evil related? Nietzsche proposes that ethics and epistemology have converged in the goodness that the latter finds in truth and not in falsity. Nietzsche will challenge this epistemological preference for the goodness of truth. Heidegger sets out to show that ethics and epistemology converge in "onto-theo-logy," in the eminence given to one being over all other beings. He rejects the very form of this superiority. Levinas proposes that ethics and epistemology converge in a moral righteousness that is not the rightness of the true but that makes truth possible. For knowledge such a condition is an *exteriority*, but for ethics it is *better* than knowledge. Ethics would not be a legitimate or illegitimate epistemological power or weakness, in the Nietzschean or Heideggerian sense, but the responsibility of the knower prior to, and the condition of, knowing.

Knowing cannot know such a condition. Socrates requires that we pause to know what right and wrong are before we act — but can

this pause ever end? Cain asks if he is his brother's keeper and is thus *already* condemned. Knowledge, even when about morality, is insufficient, inadequate, inappropriate — and inasmuch as these terms of "criticism" are themselves products of knowledge, they too are insufficient. This does not, however, imply that ethics is an ignorance, a stupidity, for ignorance is but the other side of knowledge. Rather, for Levinas "it is time the abusive confusion of foolishness with morality were denounced."[1] Knowledge must once again be reexamined.

For knowledge to be knowledge it must turn upon itself, retrieve its project, deliberate, probe, and prove. In such a quest Socrates' dictum — know thyself — is unnecessary: all knowledge is self-knowledge. Self-knowledge is the telos, the auto-nomy at the origin of knowing. Whether it takes the empirical or the transcendental turn, knowledge must reject any authority as external and alien if that authority cannot pass through its evidence-checkpoint. *Evidence*, as Husserl understood, is the "principle of principles," the legitimizing instance of knowledge. Knowing must always decide *beforehand* what will count as knowledge. Hence knowledge and method are inseparable. Even when an entire paradigm of knowledge shifts, however unpredictable the shift may be it always makes sense retrospectively. Knowledge cannot be taken by surprise. Thus it is not the specific evidential standard upheld at any particular time that makes knowledge insufficient from the ethical standpoint, but its usurpation of priority itself. Its "beforehand" *already* excludes the import of ethics and thus, also, undermines knowing's claim to wholeness.

But in its own way such a failing is not altogether unknown by knowledge. Knowledge has never, even to its own satisfaction, reasoned out its origins, or reasoned itself out of its origins. Since its inception in ancient Greece this failure has trapped it between the cold logic of Parmenides and the fiery madness of Heraclitus. That is to say, on the one hand, knowledge can claim to contain its own origin, to be one and whole, but only at cost of sacrificing the way to becoming knowledgeable, the path from finitude to perfection, from the world of change, appearance, multiplicity to the perfect unity of the one. Here being and thinking are one: eternal, unchanging, indivisible. From the formulations of Parmenides, to Pythagoras, to Spinoza, knowledge remains eternally only itself, pure, divine — the rest is illusion, indeed, the illusion of illusion, for

illusion has no being. But when, on the other hand, knowledge attempts to look outside of itself for its origin it falls into an abyss of infinite regress, of a flux verging on chaos and held from chaos for no good reason. From the formulations of Heraclitus to Hume to Nietzsche, this tendency of thought contains itself only with an evanescent hollow laughter, fading into the appearance of appearance of appearance of . . . naught. Thus knowledge, by its own lights, is torn between being and nothingness, positivity and negativity, a too perfect purity and a too imperfect impurity. Like an oyster, the irritation of knowledge over its fundamental incompleteness secretes a pearl: *myth*. From the formulations of Plato to those of Hegel philosophy attempts an impossible synthesis by means of more or less disguised myths of beginning and end. But myth only succeeds in appropriating and distorting the genuine import of knowing's lack of origin — for "in truth" here knowledge encounters the ethical situation upon which it uncomfortably rests. Knowledge, however, is so far willing to deny its own essential frustration, so far willing to defend its freedom and autonomy, that it wills the "make believe," wills the false for the sake of the true.

But this desperate addiction to *mythos* should teach the *logos* something about its limits, about the meaning of the disruption it finds so intolerable yet so inevitable. Ethics does not satisfy knowledge, it is not a myth, it is precisely what disrupts knowledge and myth. The ineradicable ethical movement beyond knowledge is not a movement on the plane of knowledge, reason, themes or representation. Nor is it a movement of creative imagination, *poesis*, or displacement. Ethics, for Levinas, is not a movement toward the light or away from the light. Rather it is a trembling movement, that cannot be measured, toward the height and destitution of the other person.

Ethical necessity escapes knowledge not because it occurs in a different territory, another world, but because it is exerted *through* but not contained *in* themes. Its force is not that of the sufficiency of reasons. Nor is its force that of a myth or ideology that props up knowledge in its weak moments. The assertion that "A logically or politically implies B" can be shown to arise out of shared presuppositions. Through such assertions knowers join together in the relevance of transpersonal truths, truths true for you as well as for me. But there is a prior question about these transpersonal truths.

This prior question concerns the epistemological criteria but cannot, without circularity, be settled by them.

For Levinas the lack of epistemological regulation here caught sight of is a positive event. Moral force cannot be reduced to cognitive cogency, to *acts* of consciousness or will. One *can* always refuse its claim; that is, once can be evil — and the capacity to rationalize such refusal is certainly without limit. Ethical necessity lies in a different sort of refusal, a refusal of concepts. It lies in prethematic demands that are necessarily lost in the elaboration of themes. Ethical necessity lies in social obligation prior to thematic thought, in a disturbance suffered by thematizing thought. "The conceptualization of this last refusal of conceptualization is not contemporaneous with this refusal; it transcends this conceptualization."[2] Ethics occurs as an unsettling of being and essence, as the "otherwise than being or beyond essence," whose *otherwise* and *beyond* cannot be thematized because goodness is better than the true and the false. This is not because ethics makes some truths better and others worse, but because it disrupts the entire project of knowing with a higher call, a more severe "condition": responsibility.

What is prior to the apriori conditions for cognition is neither the thematizing project itself, the ever escaping set of all sets, nor an antecedent attunement to being. It is the relationship with the alterity of the other person in an obligation to respond to that other, a responsibility to and for the other person that comes from him but is mine. The unassumable other of discourse — a discourse that can be true or false, beautiful or ugly, spoken or written — is the other person. This other is the ethical other, irreducible to what is known and outside the dominion of autonomy and freedom. The other, without "doing" anything, obligates the self prior to *what* the other says. It is this obligation, this responsibility to respond to the other that is, paradoxically, the unspoken first word prior to the first word spoken.

Thought retains a positive though residual awareness of this obligation. Though its telos is self-knowledge it does not think of itself or by itself. Its words are not merely its own formulations of itself in a vocal material. Nor is thought the auto-nomous movement of a system of signs. One says something *to* someone. The dative is an essential, irreducible aspect of all meaningful discourse, even if it escapes the most scrutinizing thematization, indeed, precisely inasmuch as it escapes all thematization. To acknowledge it one must

go beyond what one can grasp in themes. Movement toward the other must not be confused, then, with the epistemological search for a moment of immediacy, an irrefragable origin, a pure given. Such immediacy has been shown to be contradictory time and again (by Adorno, by Sellars, by Derrida, et al.). Knowledge will not be humbled by an immediacy it knows — rightfully — to be mediated. But knowledge of itself knows of no sufficient reason to set its sufficient reasons in motion. Rather, it only knows sufficient reasons — it *knows* nothing more compelling than reason. Knowledge wants only more knowledge, wider and more firmly established knowledge. Yet its freedom is always in search of more freedom, more autonomy. It moves, but its movement is always homecoming, even in its difficulties and uncompleted programs, across however vast a territory of accomplishments and tasks, no matter how many researchers share in its adventure. Its transcendence is always reducible to that of intentionality, never going beyond the confines of noeses and noemas. What is lacking to reason is its very *raison d'être*, its why. The movement that sustains knowledge while remaining outside of knowledge is that of the ethical situation.

The ethical situation is excessive. The originality of Levinas' ethical philosophy lies in the very exorbitance of its claim. Precisely the excess of the ethical claim is what both contests knowledge and, as a nonepistemic contestation, makes for the seriousness of the ethical situation itself. The ethical situation is a unique relation, a relation without distance or union: the *proximity* of the one for the other, the *face to face*. Each of its four components is excessive, both its "terms": (1) the alterity of the other person and (2) the passivity of the self, and their "relations": (3) the other's command and (4) my responsibility to respond. All four of these inseparable yet distinguishable elements are exorbitant, excessive, yet irreducible to knowledge and freedom. They are *infinite* in the sense Descartes gives to this term in his third Meditation when he writes that "in some way I have in me the notion of the infinite earlier than the finite" and that "the strength of my mind . . . is in some measure dazzled by the sight." Levinas borrows the word "infinite" from Descartes to characterize the alterity of the other, my own passivity, the other's command, and my responsibility. Let us look at these four components of the ethical situation in turn.

1. Ethics exceeds knowledge by beginning in what lacks an origin, a radical exteriority: the absolute alterity of the other person.

For Levinas what makes the other person other is not a unique attribute or a unique combination of attributes but the "quality" of alterity itself. The other is other because his alterity is absolute, indeterminate and indeterminable. Of course, the other is always a specific other, a fellow citizen, a widow, an orphan, a magistrate, but the other is never only that, never only a phenomenon. The *utter nakedness* of the other's face pierces all significations, historical or otherwise, that attempt to mask or comprehend it.

2. Ethics exceeds knowledge in its "terminus," an "agency" without its own origin, a radical passivity: the inalienable responsibility to respond to the other person. The radical alterity of the other person contacts the subject beneath and prior to its powers and abilities, including its acts of consciousness. Prior to the reciprocal relations that may voluntarily or traditionally bind one to another, prior to the reasons the subject may propose in response to the other, prior to the respect one may have for the other, and prior to the sensuous receptivity that may welcome the other, the self is *subjected* to the excessive alterity of the other. In relation to the other the self is reconditioned, desubstantialized, put into question. Put into relation to what it cannot integrate, the self is made to be itself "despite itself." Hence one is "in some sense," as Descartes says, — a sense indeterminable by knowing — for the other before being for oneself. Hence one is radically passive in a superlative passivity equal only to the superlative alterity of the other person.

3. The ethical relation holds together what knowing can not hold together: the absolute alterity of the other person and the absolute passivity of the self despite-itself. The other's alterity is experienced as a command, an order which as it orders ordains the self into its inalienable selfhood. It is the other who "awakens" the subject from the abilities which make the life of the ego continuous and ultimately complacent, a homecoming. The other disturbs, pierces, ruptures, disrupts the immanence into which the subject falls when free of unassimilable alterity. The other, then, contacts the self from a height and a destitution: from the height of alterity itself and from the destitution to which the frailty and ultimately the mortality of the human condition make the other destined. The unspoken message which appears in the face of the other is: do not kill me; or, since the message has no ontological force, but is the very force of morality: you *ought* not kill me; or, since the alterity of the other's face is alterity itself: thou shalt not kill.

4. Subjected to subjectivity by the excessive alterity of the other and the demand this places on me, the I becomes responsible: responsible to and for the other. Here again, responsibility is not an attribute of the self, but the self itself, the self-despite-itself is responsible to and for the other. In the face of the other, and only in the face of the other, the self becomes noninterchangeable, nonsubstitutable, which is to say, it becomes inalienably itself, "in the first person," responsible. To be oneself is to be for the other. Further, the responsibility to respond to the other is an infinite responsibility, one which increases the more it is fulfilled, for the other is not an end that can be satisfied. The self is responsible for all the frailty of the other, the other's hungers, wounds, desires; and for the very responsibility of the other — I am my brother's keeper; as well as for the very death of the other, so that the other may not die alone, forsaken.

Excessive alterity, excessive passivity, excessive demand, excessive responsibility — these are the components of the ethical situation that Levinas draws to the attention of philosophy. The relevance of such a situation cannot be that of a "new" theme or a potential theme. Rather, ethics is the essentially nonencompassable context, the nonplace, the u-topia, within which knowing "takes place." The identities, themes, reflections and reasons of knowledge occur within the exorbitant context of the nonidentifiable, nonrepresentable, nonthematizable, nonreflective, unjustified proximity of one face to another. Cutting knowledge (with a wound) diagonally, as it were, ethics is that absolute from out of which emerges the relative exteriority and interiority of knowledge — evidence and intentionality — without being on the same plane as itself, thus without submitting to the constraints of epistemology.

Knowledge is not thereby degraded. Indeed it is an important product of the ethical situation itself and has tremendous ethical significance beyond its natural tendency to cover up its beginnings. Knowledge emerges from the ethical situation owing to exigencies within that situation itself. The excess of the ethical relation needs limitations "to breathe," one might say, but in truth it needs limitations because the world contains more than two people. We do not live in the garden of Eden. More than ethics is required in order to be good, *justice* is also required. The subject realizes that the absolute other is also other relative to others, and that its own inalienable, infinite responsibility for the other is also a responsibility to others

and a responsibility like others'. In this way the value of justice, of *equality*, emerges from the originary unequalled and *unequal* ethical relation. The demands of justice arise from out of the ethical situation and at the same time pose a danger for that situation. The danger of justice, *injustice*, is the forgetting of the human face. The human face "regulates," is the goodness of justice itself. "The fact that the other, my neighbor, is also a third party with respect to another, who is also a neighbor, is the birth of thought, consciousness, justice and philosophy. The unlimited initial responsibility, which justifies this concern for justice, for oneself, and for philosophy can be forgotten. In this forgetting consciousness is a pure egoism. But egoism is neither first nor last."[3]

Levinas' writings, then, are paradoxical. As philosophy they must justify themselves, but their justification lies beyond the text, not in a reference, a signified, but in what is essentially elusive: goodness, sincerity. Knowledge must be of the true. It cannot be "corrected" by knowing the good for the good is good insofar as it is *outside* knowledge. This is precisely the trouble with knowledge, in a double sense: by essence it cannot know the good, but it is disturbed by the good, by the ethical plenitude that encompasses and escapes it. Hence Levinas' writings are condemned to incessantly speak *about* the good, about the "*to* the other" of ethical discourse. His writings are signs of lost traces. Levinas admits this paradox: signs of non-signs, sense of nonsense, justification of the unjustifiable. Yet it is by raising this paradox, by invoking its nonmeasurable movement, that his writings make sense in transgressing sense. The absence of the ethical subject is the ethical subject-matter whose escape is the "evidence" that animates Levinas' writings. Can this tenuous exercise bring seriousness to knowledge? Can knowledge, on the other hand, take it seriously?

It is the impropriety of Levinas' ethical claims that draws together the articles selected for this collection: they are caught with their guard down, struck by the anteriority of the ethical claim, challenged by it into thought, *wondering* which comes first, the thought or the challenge, the statement or its moral force, questioning anew what it means to come first, what it means to "do" philosophy.

Part II of this collection, "From Ethics to Philosophy," then is both its center and heart. Here lies the issue: the question of the relation of ethics to thought, the problem of a thought which must somehow think the unthinkable, the paradoxical language of the good in philosophy. Steven G. Smith, Charles William Reed, Theodore de Boer and Jan de Greef, examine Levinas from within, as it were, in an attempt to precisely pinpoint those crucial moments when what cannot be said is said, and to articulate the nonepistemic conditions that make them possible. Jean-Francois Lyotard and Robert Bernasconi are no less interested in these moments, but illuminate them in relation to Kant's notion of respect and the elusiveness of Derridaian semiology respectively.

Part I, "Proximity," and Part III, "Contexts," "contain" the uneasy paradoxes of the center. Richard Kearney's interview provides a concise overview of the wide range of Levinas' thought. "Bad Conscience and the Inexorable," by Levinas, affords a glimpse of his thought at work. Blanchot's brief remarks offer a sensitive appreciation by one of France's leading literary critics and a life long personal friend of Levinas. Adriaan Peperzak and Alphonso Lingis draw us outside the central debate to explore other lines opened up by Levinas' thought, in its relation to Hegel, Kant and Heidegger, Luce Irigaray, too, explores alternative lines, taking ethical alterity to the alterity of the erotic encounter.

Collections such as this gather around original thought, not merely to be warmed by its radiance, but to radiate, to light various ways, and to indicate distances traversed and distances yet to be traveled. Levinas challenges thought to rethink its proper righteousness, to grapple with the forever unstable unity of being and the better than being.

Notes

1. AEAE 162/OBBE 126.

2. AEAE 163/OBBE 127.

3. AEAE 165/OBBE 128.

Part I

Proximity

1. *Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas*

Richard Kearney: Perhaps you could retrace your philosophical itinerary by identifying some of the major influences on your thought?

Emmanuel Levinas: Apart from the great masters of the history of philosophy — in particular Plato, Descartes, and Kant — the first contemporary influence on my own thinking was Bergson. In 1925, in Strasbourg University, Bergson was being hailed as France's leading thinker. For example, Blondel, one of his Strasbourg disciples, developed a specifically Bergsonian psychology quite hostile to Freud — a hostility that made a deep and lasting impression on me. Moreover, Bergson's theory of time as concrete duration (*la durée concrète*) is, I believe, one of the most significant, if largely ignored, contributions to contemporary philosophy. Indeed, it was this Bergsonian emphasis on temporality that prepared the soil for the subsequent implantation of Heideggerian phenomenology into France. It is all the more ironic, therefore, that in *Being and Time* Heidegger unjustly accuses Bergson of reducing time to space. What is more, in Bergson's *Creative Evolution*, one finds the whole notion of technology as the destiny of the Western philosophy of reason. Bergson was the first to contrast technology, as a logical and necessary expression of scientific rationality, with an alternative form of human expression that he called creative intuition or impulse — the *élan vital*. All of Heidegger's celebrated analyses of our technological era as the logical culmination of Western metaphysics and its forgetfulness of being came after Bergson's reflections on the subject. Bergson's importance to contemporary Continental thought has been

somewhat obfuscated; he has been suspended in a sort of limbo; but I believe it is only a temporary suspension.

> Could you describe how, after Bergson, you came under the influence of the German phenomenologists, Husserl and Heidegger?

It was in 1927 that I first became interested in Husserl's phenomenology, which was still unknown in France at that time. I traveled to the University of Freiburg for two semesters in 1928–29 and studied phenomenology with Husserl and also, of course, with Heidegger, who was then the leading light in German philosophy after the publication of *Being and Time* in 1927. Phenomenology represented the second, but undoubtedly most important, philosophical influence on my thinking. Indeed, from the point of view of philosophical method and discipline, I remain to this day a phenomenologist.

> How would you characterize the particular contribution of phenomenology to modern philosophy?

The most fundamental contribution of Husserl's phenomenology is its methodical disclosure of how meaning comes to be, how it emerges in our consciousness of the world, or more precisely, in our becoming conscious of our intentional rapport (*visée*) with the world. The phenomenological method enables us to discover meaning within our lived experience; it reveals consciousness to be an intentionality always in *contact* with objects outside of itself, other than itself. Human experience is not some self-transparent substance or pure *cogito*; it is always intending or tending towards something in the world that preoccupies it. The phenomenological method permits consciousness to understand its own preoccupations, to reflect upon itself and thus discover all the hidden or neglected horizons of its intentionality. In other words, by returning to the implicit horizons of consciousness, phenomenology enables us to explicate or unfold the full intentional meaning of an object, which would otherwise be presented as an abstract and isolated entity cut off from its intentional horizons. Phenomenology thus teaches us that consciousness is at once tied to the object of its experience and yet free to detach itself from this object in order to return upon itself, focusing on those *visées* of intentionality in which the object emerges as *meaningful*, as part of our lived experience. One might say that phenom-

enology is a way of becoming aware of where we are in the world, a *sich besinnen* that consists of a recovery of the origin of meaning in our life world, or *Lebenswelt*.

> Your second major work was entitled *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*. If Husserl introduced you to the phenomenological method, how would you assess your debt to Heidegger?

Heidegger's philosophy was a shock for me, and for most of my contemporaries in the late twenties and thirties. It completely altered the course and character of European philosophy. I think that one cannot seriously philosophize today without traversing the Heideggerian path in some form or other. *Being and Time*, which is much more significant and profound than any of Heidegger's later works, represents the fruition and flowering of Husserlian phenomenology. The most far-reaching potentialities of the phenomenological method were exploited by Heidegger in this early work, particularly in his phenomenological analysis of 'anguish' as the fundamental mood of our existence. Heidegger brilliantly described how this existential mood, or *Stimmung*, revealed the way in which we are attuned to being. Human moods, such as guilt, fear, anxiety, joy, or dread, are no longer considered as mere physiological sensations or psychological emotions, but are now recognized as the ontological ways in which we feel and find our being-in-the-world, our being-there, as *Befindlichkeit*.

> This phenomenological analysis of our existential moods was, of course, something that you yourself used to original effect in your descriptions of such human dispositions as need, desire, effort, laziness, and insomnia in *Existence and Existents*. But to return to Husserl and Heidegger, how would you define the main difference of *style* in their employment of phenomenology?

Husserl's approach was always more abstract and ponderous — one really had to have one's ears cocked if one wished to understand his lectures! Husserl was primarily concerned with establishing and perfecting phenomenology as a method, that is, as an epistemological method of describing how our logical concepts and categories emerge and assume an essential meaning. What is the relation

between our logical judgments and our perceptual experience? This was Husserl's question — and phenomenology was his method of responding by means of rigorous and exact descriptions of our intentional modes of consciousness. Phenomenology was thus a way of suspending our preconceptions and prejudices in order to disclose how essential truth and meaning are generated; it was a methodical return to the beginnings, to the origins, of knowledge. On the other hand, Heidegger, the young disciple, brought the phenomenological method to life and gave it a contemporary style and relevance. Heidegger's existential analyses possessed a poetic quality and force that enchanted and astonished the mind, while preserving all the while the rigorous contours of the master's method. So that I would say, by way of summary, that if it was Husserl who opened up for me the radical possibilities of a phenomenological analysis of knowledge, it was Heidegger who first gave these possibilities a positive and concrete grounding in our everyday existence; Heidegger showed that the phenomenological search for eternal truths and essences ultimately originates in *time*, in our temporal and historical existence.

> Your first study of phenomenology, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, published in 1930, was the first complete work on Husserl in French. Your seminal study of Heidegger in *La Revue philosophique* in 1932 was another milestone in contemporary French philosophy. Sartre and Merleau-Ponty were soon to follow suit, exploring further possibilities of the phenomenological method known today as French existentialism. As the discreet inaugurator of the French interest in phenomenology, what exactly was your relationship with Sartre and Merleau-Ponty?

I have always admired the powerful originality of Merleau-Ponty's work, however different from my own in many respects, and had frequent contact with him at Jean Wahl's philosophical meetings in the *Collège de Philosophie* in the thirties and forties, and also whenever I contributed to *Les Temps Modernes* while he was still coeditor with Sartre. But it was Sartre who guaranteed my place in eternity by stating in his famous obituary essay on Merleau-Ponty that he, Sartre, "was introduced to phenomenology by Levinas." Simone de Beauvoir tells how it happened, in one of her autobiographical works. One day in the early thirties, Sartre chanced upon a copy of my book on Husserl in the Picard bookshop just opposite the Sor-

bonne. He picked it up, read it, and declared to de Beauvoir, "This is the philosophy I wanted to write!" Afterwards he reassured himself that my analysis was far too didactic and that he could do better himself! And so he applied himself to a sustained study of Husserl and Heidegger. The result was a host of enterprising phenomenological analyses, ranging from *Imagination* (1936) to *Being and Nothingness* (1943). I was extremely interested in Sartre's phenomenological analysis of the 'other', though I always regretted that he interpreted it as a threat and a degradation, an interpretation that also found expression in his fear of the God question. In fact, Sartre's rejection of theism was so unequivocal that his final statements, in the *Nouvel Observateur* interviews just before his death, about the legitimacy of Jewish history as a belief in the existence of God seemed incredible to those who knew him or had studied him. In Sartre the phenomenon of the other was still considered, as in all Western ontology, to be a modality of unity and fusion, that is, a reduction of the other to the categories of the same. This is described by Sartre as a teleological project to unite and totalize the for-itself and the in-itself, the self and the other-than-self. It is here that my fundamental philosophical disagreement with Sartre lay. At a personal level, I always liked Sartre. I first met him in Gabriel Marcel's house just before the war and had further dealings with him after the war on the controversial question of Israel's existence. Sartre had refused the Nobel Prize for Literature, and I felt that someone who had the courage to reject such a prize for ethical reasons had certainly conserved the right to intervene and to try to persuade Nasser, the Egyptian leader at the time, to forego his threats to Israel and embark upon dialogue. What I also admired in Sartre was that his philosophy was not confined to purely conceptual issues but was open to the possibility of ethical and political commitment.

> What are the origins of the religious dimensions in your own thinking?

I was born in Lithuania, a country where Jewish culture was intellectually prized and fostered and where the interpretation and exegesis of biblical texts was cultivated to a high degree. It was here that I first learned to read the Bible in Hebrew. It was at a much later date, however, that I became actively interested in Jewish thought. After the Second World War, I encountered a remarkable master of Tal-

mudic interpretation here in Paris, a man of exceptional mental agility, who taught me how to read the Rabbinic texts. He taught me for four years, from 1947 to 1951, and what I myself have written in my *Talmudic Lectures* has been written in the shadow of his shadow. It was this postwar encounter that reactivated my latent — I might even say dormant — interest in the Judaic tradition. But when I acknowledge this Judaic influence, I do not wish to talk in terms of belief or nonbelief. *Believe* is not a verb to be employed in the first person singular. Nobody can really say *I believe* — or *I do not believe* for that matter — that God exists. The existence of God is not a question of an individual soul's uttering logical syllogisms. It cannot be proved. The existence of God, the *Sein Gottes*, is sacred history itself, the sacredness of man's relation to man through which God may pass. God's existence is the story of his revelation in biblical history.

> How do you reconcile the phenomenological and religious dimensions of your thinking?

I always make a clear distinction, in what I write, between philosophical and confessional texts. I do not deny that they may ultimately have a common source of inspiration. I simply state that it is necessary to draw a line of demarcation between them as distinct methods of exegesis, as separate languages. I would never, for example, introduce a Talmudic or biblical verse into one of my philosophical texts, to try to prove or justify a phenomenological argument.

> Would you go so far as to endorse Heidegger's argument that genuine philosophical questioning requires one to suspend or bracket one's religious faith? I am thinking in particular of Heidegger's statement in his *Introduction to Metaphysics* that a religious thinker cannot ask the philosophical question, "Why is there something rather than nothing?" — since he already possesses the answer: "Because God created the world." Hence Heidegger's conclusion that a religious (in the sense of Christian or Jewish) philosophy is a square circle, a contradiction in terms.

For me the essential characteristic of philosophy is a certain, specifically Greek, way of thinking and speaking. Philosophy is primarily a question of language; and it is by identifying the subtextual lan-

guage of particular discourses that we can decide whether they are philosophical or not. Philosophy employs a series of terms and concepts — such as *morphe* (form), *ousia* (substance), *nous* (reason), *logos* (thought) or *telos* (goal), etc. — that constitute a specifically Greek lexicon of intelligibility. French and German, and indeed all of Western philosophy, is entirely shot through with this specific language; it is a token of the genius of Greece to have been able to deposit its language thus in the basket of Europe. But although philosophy is essentially Greek, it is not exclusively so. It also has sources and roots that are non-Greek. What we term the Judeo-Christian tradition, for example, proposed an alternative approach to meaning and truth. The difficulty is, of course, to *speak* of this alternative tradition, given the essentially Greek nature of philosophical language. And this difficulty is compounded by the fact that Judeo-Christian culture has, historically, been incorporated into Greek philosophy. It is virtually impossible for philosophers today to have recourse to an unalloyed religious language. All one can say is that the Septuagint is not yet complete, that the translation of biblical wisdom into the Greek language remains unfinished. The best one can do by way of identifying the fundamental difference between the Greek and biblical approaches to truth is to try to define the distinctive quality of Greek philosophy before the historical incursion of Jewish and Christian cultures. Perhaps the most essential distinguishing feature of the language of Greek philosophy was its equation of truth with an *intelligiblity of presence*. By this I mean an intelligiblity that considers truth to be that which is present or copresent, that which can be gathered or synchronized into a totality that we would call the world or *cosmos*. According to the Greek model, intelligibility is what can be rendered present, what can be represented in some eternal here and now, exposed and disclosed in pure light. To equate truth thus with presence is to presume that however different the two terms of a relation might appear (e.g., the Divine and the human) or however separated over time (e.g., into past and future), they can ultimately be rendered commensurate and simultaneous, the same, contained in a history that totalizes time into a beginning or an end, or both, which is presence. The Greek notion of being is essentially this presence.

> Would you agree, then, with Heidegger's critique of Western metaphysics as a philosophy of presence?