

Rethinking Levinas on Heidegger on Death

By *Iain Thomson*

I. Heidegger and Levinas: Beyond the Standard View

THE EXPLOSION OF INTEREST IN LEVINAS OVER THE LAST FIFTEEN YEARS FOLLOWED IN THE wake of the recent wave of “post-Farías” furor over Heidegger’s Nazism, and not by chance: That latest eruption of “the Heidegger controversy” cooled into the received view that Heidegger’s inability to articulate an ethics demonstrated the blind spot of this otherwise uncircumventable thinker of the twentieth century, and Levinas—a Jewish philosopher who developed his ethical perspective precisely as a post-Heideggerian response to the Holocaust or *Shoah*—appeared to many to be just the right figure to fill this ethical gap. The standard view here is that Heidegger’s own early affiliation with the regime responsible for the horrors of Auschwitz, combined with his subsequent failure ever to even try to come to terms with this great trauma of the twentieth century, render the ethical deficiencies of his ontological perspective obvious, and so demonstrate the need to ground Heidegger’s ontological thinking in the supposedly more “fundamental” ethical perspective opened up by Levinas. Now, this received view of the relation between Heidegger and Levinas makes for a dramatic narrative, and one with reassuringly unambiguous moral contours, but there are at least two things wrong with it: It gets Heidegger wrong, and, in so doing, it gets Levinas wrong as well.

That the received view misreads Heidegger I shall not dwell on here, except, no doubt a bit too provocatively, to make two minor but controversial points of correction and then draw out some of their admittedly contentious implications. First, it is true that Heidegger, to the end, obstinately refused to publicly repudiate or apologize for his early Nazi affiliation, instead insisting, with forlorn pride, on the self-serving illusion that a very different National Socialism had been possible in the early 1930s, if only more intellectuals had been willing to get their hands dirty—a fantasy Sluga thoroughly vitiates by

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showing that Hitler never cared a whit for the views of *any* living intellectual.¹ At the same time, however, we also know now that Heidegger's supposedly damning "silence" on the Holocaust is in fact something of a myth.² Heidegger, at least, thought he had articulated the philosophical perspective necessary for understanding Auschwitz, as we can tell from the public remarks he made about the death camps in 1949. Quite understandably, it has not been easy for readers to see the point behind Heidegger's shockingly callous and abbreviated treatment of so momentous an issue. Heidegger's nearly constitutional incapacity to admit his own mistakes apparently sat too uncomfortably with the "growing shame" he privately confessed to Jaspers the following year (1950) for Heidegger to be able to develop his analysis in any detail.

Nonetheless, as I show in *Heidegger on Ontotheology: Technology and the Politics of Education*, the later Heidegger's central critical insight is that our "technological," Nietzschean ontotheology, which preconceives the being of entities as "eternally recurring will-to-power"—that is, as mere forces coming-together and breaking-apart with no end other than their self-perpetuating increase—works tacitly to shape (or "enframe") our sense of reality, leading us increasingly to transform all entities, human beings disastrously included, into intrinsically-meaningless "resources" (*Bestand*) standing by merely to be used with optimal flexibility and efficiency. Once we recognize this, I think we cannot help but acknowledge that Heidegger's notorious 1949 evocation of the way "the gas chambers and the death camps" reduce human beings to mere "resource materials standing by for the manufacture of corpses [*Bestandstücke eines Bestand der Fabrikation von Leichen*]" clearly indicates that he understood Auschwitz as an extreme symptom of the "technological" ontotheology undergirding our age.³

Because Heidegger's later work as a whole seeks to help us think beneath and beyond this nihilistic ontotheology, enthusiastic Heideggerians might be tempted to conclude that, rather than simply ignoring Auschwitz, Heidegger, in his own way, dedicated his later career to contesting what he understood to be the ontotheological roots of such devastating historical effects. Yet, whether one finds Heidegger's ontotheological understanding of Auschwitz convincing or not (and I shall suggest reasons for finding his view less than convincing in this crucial case), such an aggressive strategy of hermeneutic de-Nazification will seem to most readers to be rhetorically excessive and misleading, too similar to and so potentially complicitous with the now discredited exculpatory narratives long disseminated by Heidegger and his orthodox Heideggerian apologists. More importantly, such a reading risks obscuring the fact that, even if Heidegger's critique of ontotheology does help us to understand the Holocaust, it does so seemingly only as an afterthought, and certainly not, as with Levinas, as the fundamental philosophical motivation for learning to think *ethically*.

This brings me to the second problem with the received reading of Levinas's relation to Heidegger, which, being less controversial, I shall simply state: Heidegger characterized his later endeavor to address the ontotheological roots of contemporary nihilism as his own "originary ethics," by which he meant that he was developing an *ethics* pitched at the level of the original sense of the Greek word *êthos*, our basic comportment or way of being-in-the-world.⁴ Yet, if we connect the first point to this one, then the conclusion that undermines the standard

view of Heidegger and Levinas seems to follow inexorably: The later Heidegger's "originary ethics" sought to develop a comportmental attunement he hoped would help us transcend the underlying ontotheology that he held responsible for the greatest traumas of the twentieth century. To be clear, this is precisely not to claim that Heidegger took himself to be articulating an ethical response to the Holocaust in particular. For, Heidegger clearly understood the death camps only as an extreme expression of the same underlying ontotheology he also saw revealed in such phenomena as Russia's post-war blockade of Germany (which sought to starve human beings for the sake of political leverage) and, much more shockingly, in mechanized agribusiness (by which we treat nature merely as an intrinsically-meaningless resource to be optimized). To many of us, Heidegger's infamous comparison of the death camps with mechanized agribusiness sounds almost obscene, and clearly reveals an incredible insensitivity to the real suffering of human beings, whose cries seem almost inaudible from the lofty perspective of the history of being—drowned out, perhaps, by the swan song of the earth itself, to whose somber notes Heidegger's ear remains so singularly trained.

Whatever the reason for Heidegger's inability to recognize Auschwitz in its historical uniqueness, one can conclude that this failure prevents his own "originary ethics" from ever providing a genuinely ethical response to the Holocaust as such. This, however, is not because Heidegger fails to formulate the kind of clear and unambiguous action-guiding principles we need in order to preempt future genocides. That objection is not without merit, but in our context it misses the point that Levinas's own "ethics"—widely celebrated precisely as providing the requisite ethical response to the Holocaust—remain "ethical" only in the same sense as Heidegger's "originary ethics." Indeed, Levinas and Heidegger pitch their "ethics" *at precisely the same level*, addressing the basic comportment of our everyday interactions rather than providing moral decision procedures. Thus, while their ethical views remain different (in some obvious and some surprisingly subtle ways), neither thinker can simply claim to be the sole proprietor of a more "fundamental" ethical perspective, as Levinas liked to do.⁵ In the end, of course, it might well turn out that Levinas's ethics represent the more appropriate lesson to be drawn from Auschwitz, in the sense that what I will call Levinas's *metaphysical humanism* might make for a better firebreak against future holocausts than Heidegger's ethics of dwelling, but that view needs to be argued for rather than simply asserted, and, I shall suggest at the end, the case for it is less obvious than is generally assumed.

In fact, as I have argued elsewhere, Heidegger's and Levinas's ethical views—as two different kinds of *transcendental ethical realism*—remain surprisingly similar. The main difference between them is that Levinas's metaphysical humanism restricts the ethical domain to relations between human beings, whereas Heidegger's more broadly concerns our relations to other non-human realms. Levinas himself recognizes this and repeatedly dismisses the Heideggerian concern for our relations to other animals and to non-human "things" as a return to a pre-Judeo-Christian "paganism." As a consequence, however, Levinas's own metaphysical humanism leads politically to a "speciesism" that remains both phenomenologically problematic and ethically tractionless in a wide range of cases, unable to recognize, let alone resist, what an increasing number of

contemporary ethicists now recognize as the almost indiscriminate slaughter of non-human animals as well as the broader ecological catastrophe.⁶ In other words, if thinking about the Holocaust helps motivate Levinas's humanism, worrying about other kinds of ethico-political disasters reveals the continuing suggestiveness of Heidegger's ethical "paganism," Heidegger's belief that what Levinas calls "alterity" can also be discovered in our relations to things that are not human.

So as to avoid any unnecessary controversy here at the outset, let me make clear that I am not claiming that Heidegger actually succeeded in working through Auschwitz, let alone that his understanding of the Holocaust should be accepted or even privileged—for example, as providing philosophical antibodies cultivated from the very subject originally infected with the totalitarian virus, as Lacoue-Labarthe and Dallmayr influentially suggest.⁷ I am more inclined to conclude the very opposite, namely, that Auschwitz is precisely what Heidegger's critique of ontotheology *cannot* explain, and what thus reveals the limits of the critical perspective distinctive of his later thought. For, what jumps out as most conspicuously absent from Heidegger's understanding of Auschwitz as an extreme expression of our nihilistic Nietzschean ontotheology is the fact that, although this perspective sheds a revealing critical light on both (1) the inhumanly rational system the Nazis developed in order to carry out their attempted genocide and (2) the broader framework behind the "biologistic metaphysics" of racial indigency which Heidegger discerned in the Nazi pursuit of a eugenically purified "master race," it nonetheless cannot explain why the Nazis focused so obsessively on the Jewish people in the first place.⁸ Put simply, there is still quite a leap required to get from the idea of the earth as an historical arena for the struggle between races (an idea that Heidegger's longstanding critique of Nietzsche's metaphysics helps us to uproot and reject) to the idea that the supposed Jewish "race" in particular had to be eradicated, and this is a leap about which Heidegger's view leaves us entirely in the dark, as far as I can see. Or, to approach the same problem from another angle, one may conclude that Heidegger's critique of our Nietzschean, "technological" ontotheology compellingly illuminates the deeper historical logic behind the "total mobilization" of the Nazi war machine (and the global arms race it catalyzed, in which we remain caught to this day), but one must still recognize, with Hannah Arendt, that the resources the Nazis poured into the Holocaust did not in fact serve this total mobilization but, rather, undermined it, diverting valuable resources from the war effort right to the end, such that the Holocaust stands out as a terrible exception to the Nazi's otherwise total mobilization.⁹ From the perspective of Heidegger's critique of ontotheology, in short, Auschwitz as such remains a dark and terrible anomaly.¹⁰

My own less controversial theses here, then, would only be that Heidegger and Levinas both understood themselves as struggling to articulate the requisite ethical response to the great traumas of the twentieth century, and that if we compare their thinking at this level, we can better understand the ways in which Levinas—like all other important post-Heideggerian thinkers—genuinely diverges from Heidegger even while building on his thinking.¹¹ I began by suggesting that the received view of the relation between Heidegger and Levinas has impoverished our understanding not only of Heidegger, but also of

Levinas himself, and one of my main goals in what follows will be to suggest that if we want to fully understand Levinas's own views, then instead of treating his ethical thinking simply as a propaedeutic or groundwork to Heidegger's ethically impoverished ontological perspective (a reading which authorizes Levinasians to ignore or dismiss Heidegger), we do much better to appreciate Levinas as a post-Heideggerian thinker, that is, as someone working critically against the background and within the perspective opened up by Heidegger's work. If, with a few notable exceptions, Levinas scholarship has been slow to emerge from hermeneutic insularity and isolation (even within "continental" philosophy), Levinas is at least partly responsible, because his growing hostility to Heidegger, visible in the remarkably "un-Levinasian" spirit of some of his Heidegger interpretations, helped convince many Levinasians that they could understand Levinas without recognizing just how integrally entwined the essential themes of Levinas's thinking are with Heidegger's work, especially (but by no means exclusively) *Being and Time*, the great philosophical importance of which Levinas, to his credit, never ceased insisting upon. However understandable this hostility was in Levinas's own case (a more extreme case of Bloom's "anxiety of influence" would be difficult even to imagine!), its effects have not served Levinas scholarship well. The main problem, I think, is that Levinas's rhetorical exaggerations of his distance from Heidegger have obscured their common phenomenological ground, thereby blocking the recognition that Levinas was not only one of the earliest but also one of the most faithful and creative interpreters of *Being and Time*.

I am not suggesting that the only way to be hermeneutically faithful to a creative philosopher like Heidegger is to betray him or, more precisely, to betray the letter of his text in order to respect its spirit by creatively developing its insights well beyond anything to which Heidegger himself would or could have assented, but such creative betrayal seems preferable to the myrmidonian devotion that still passes for thinking in some circles. In fact, even Heidegger's own notion of "repetition" (*Wiederholung*) suggests that such hermeneutic betrayal is justified when it is motivated by a deeper fidelity to the phenomenon whose attempted description we have "inherited" (where *inherited* means actively taken up from the otherwise ossified "tradition" and updated, via a "reciprocative rejoinder," to meet the deepest needs of the contemporary world), as Heidegger insisted he had broken with Husserl out of a greater faithfulness to the phenomenological project itself, the attempt to describe the matters that matter without distorting these "things themselves" by reading them back through our unnoticed metaphysical categories and frameworks.¹² If this is right, then in order to gauge Levinas's faithfulness to Heidegger, we need to understand the phenomenon both seek to describe, see exactly where they disagree and what is really at stake in their disagreement, and then independently evaluate the phenomenon for ourselves. To begin to do this here, I shall focus on that crucial phenomenon Heidegger calls "death," which Levinas rightly insisted was at the heart of his disagreement with Heidegger.

Of course, to say that what Heidegger means by "death" is controversial would be to strain the limits of understatement. This is owing, first, to the obscurity and confusingly non-commonsensical terminology of those passages in *Being and Time* where Heidegger provides phenomenological descriptions

of what he calls “death”; second, to the obvious centrality of the subject to the text as a whole (Haugeland observes, and Levinas would agree, that “death, as Heidegger means it, is not merely relevant but in fact the fulcrum of Heidegger’s entire ontology”); and, third, to the particular difficulty that readers have had in phenomenologically attesting to (and thereby verifying or else contesting) Heidegger’s phenomenological description of “death.”¹³ Rather than devote this entire paper to presenting and defending my interpretation, I shall instead draw on some earlier work in order to present my view rather schematically, and then go on to emphasize those elements of Heidegger’s account most relevant to Levinas’s critique.¹⁴ It is my hope that this decidedly non-standard interpretation will gain plausibility from the way it allows us to recognize just how profoundly Heidegger’s phenomenology of death influenced Levinas’s own view of the matter (and so, although I cannot show this here, the way “death” was subsequently interpreted and contested in the “continental” tradition stretching from Levinas to Derrida and Agamben).¹⁵

II. From Heidegger to Levinas: The Basic Terms of the Dispute

I HAVE MADE THE CASE ELSEWHERE THAT HEIDEGGER DEVELOPS A “PERFECTIONIST” philosophy of education in *Being and Time*, a phenomenological account that links his *ontological* understanding of what most importantly distinguishes our human form of life with his *ethical* view of the way developing this distinctive “essence” enables human life to reach its greatest “fulfillment” (*Vollendung*).¹⁶ Building on my earlier account (which itself builds on the work of Blattner, Dreyfus, Cavell, and others), I would like to show here that the deepest and most interesting set of disagreements between Heidegger and Levinas concern precisely this central perfectionist question: *How do we become genuinely or fully ourselves?* Heidegger’s and Levinas’s competing phenomenological descriptions of what authentic self-fulfillment entails, I shall suggest, follow from their quarrel over the meaning of “death.” This famous disagreement concerns not only the proper phenomenology of death, but also its relation to the ultimate meaning of life, and, owing to its formative influence on thinkers such as Derrida and Agamben, this *gigantomachia* over the phenomenology of death remains one of the most important disputes in twentieth century continental philosophy.¹⁷ (This means that, even if this interpretation should turn out to be wrong about what Heidegger really meant by “death,” it would still help us to better understand how Heidegger’s analysis of death has influenced some of the leading continental thinkers who followed in his footsteps.)

What, then, are the basic coordinates of the dispute between Heidegger and Levinas over the phenomenology and, consequently, the ontological significance of “death”? Otherwise put, in what ways do Heidegger and Levinas disagree about how we become *genuinely or fully ourselves*? Their competing answers to this perfectionist question diverge sharply; Heidegger and Levinas disagree both about what self-fulfillment *is* and about *how* it can be achieved. Remember that in *Being and Time*, Heidegger conceives of self-fulfillment in terms of *becoming authentic*, contending that we achieve authenticity by traversing its two structural moments, “anticipation” (*vorlaufen*) and “resolve” (*Entschlossenheit*). As he succinctly puts it: “Dasein becomes ‘essentially’ Dasein in that authentic

existence which constitutes itself as anticipatory resoluteness." (BT, p. 370/SZ, p. 323)¹⁸ In other words, Heidegger thinks we become ourselves through a two step process of, first, "anticipating" or "running out toward" what he calls "death"—an experience of radical individuation in which we die to the world, as it were—and then, on the basis of the insight gained by this encounter of the self with itself in death, we find a way, through what he calls "resolution," to reflexively reconnect to the world lost touch with in death. Thus, authenticity, as anticipatory resoluteness, names a double movement in which the world lost in anticipation is regained in resolve, a literally *revolutionary* movement by which we are involuntarily turned away from the world and then voluntarily turn back to it, a movement in which the grip of the world upon us is broken in order that we may thereby gain (or regain) our grip on this world.¹⁹

Levinas, I now want to suggest, builds his own account of how we become fully ourselves upon the structure of Heidegger's phenomenology of authenticity, indeed, so much so that Levinas's phenomenology of self-fulfillment simply cannot be understood without this Heideggerian background, which Levinas continually presupposes, but never explicitly acknowledges or explains.²⁰ We can begin to see this if we recall that authenticity's double movement of anticipation and resolve, death and rebirth, has long been thought of as Heidegger's phenomenological version of *conversion*, since it is a movement in which we turn away from the world, recover ourselves, and then turn back to the world, transformed by the process.²¹ Levinas too is centrally concerned to provide a phenomenological description of such "death" and its role in what he goes so far as to call the self's "resurrection" (TI, pp. 56, 284), and the structure of Levinas's account is almost identical to Heidegger's, in the following way. Just like Heidegger, Levinas thinks we become fully ourselves only when we confront our "death" and then—on the basis of the transformative realization afforded by this confrontation with death—we find a way back to the world, a world which we thereby come to understand quite differently.²² Only if we keep this Heideggerian structure of Levinas's phenomenology of self-fulfillment in mind, I submit, will we be able to recognize their genuine *substantive* disagreements, understanding exactly where, and why, Levinas breaks with Heidegger and seeks to elaborate his alternative account of how we becomes truly or fully ourselves.

For, in what amounts to a formidable immanent critique of Heidegger's phenomenology of authenticity, Levinas challenges four interconnected aspects of Heidegger's account and offers his own positive alternatives. I shall quickly sketch these four differences, then devote the rest of this paper to exploring them in more detail. *First, Levinas objects to Heidegger's phenomenological description of the self confronting itself in "death."* According to Levinas's famous critique, what Heidegger calls "death" reveals the self's indomitable "virility" and "lucidity," whereas Levinas himself thinks that death delivers the stroke of a paralyzing passivity which this self is unable to surmount of its own power. *Second, Levinas disputes the nature of the crucial insight afforded by the self's confrontation with death.* For Heidegger, confronting death enables us to discover something about ourselves that remains more powerful than death, an aspect of the self (which he calls our "ownmost ability-to-be") that does not go down with the shipwreck of our life-projects but rather survives for as long as each of us do. By contrast, Levinas

thinks that death renders us utterly powerless and passive, thereby revealing the other person as providing our only chance to pass through death toward a future this death has placed beyond our reach. Levinas holds, moreover, in perhaps the definitive claim of his work, that recognizing the other person as the only vessel capable of transporting us through "death" into the future allows us to understand the other person as the sole bearer of "what is not yet," that is, of *alterity*.

Third, Levinas contests Heidegger's account of how it is that the self lives through death and thereby reconnects to the world. What Heidegger calls "resoluteness" relies upon the lucidity and virility death reveals in a second-order decision that frees this self to reconnect to its world by choosing the projects that define it. Levinas, for his part, believes that the self can reconnect to the world only by giving itself over to another person—paradigmatically a "teacher" or "master"—with whom this self can grope, in conversation, toward a future it cannot yet comprehend. *Fourth, and finally, Levinas opposes Heidegger's description of how the self who finds a way back to the world is transformed by the adventure.* Heidegger's authentic self becomes itself fully by seizing its "fate" and thereby helping to shape the communal "destiny" of its generation, which it accomplishes through a creative "repetition" of a project drawn from the past, enabling this self to establish the relatively continuous identity of itself and its community. Levinas, by contrast, thinks that we fully become ourselves only by being reborn as another person, becoming radically different from our previous self-conception. Through a process Levinas calls "transubstantiation," we are transformed into wholly other-directed selves, committed to a community of those dedicated entirely to alterity, and so to the future, to continual transformation, even to the "permanent revolution" of "incessant death and resurrection," as Levinas rather dramatically puts it.

Of course, Levinas, an avowed enemy of all "totalizing" systems, would never present his immanent critique of Heidegger's secularized phenomenological account of the conversion to an authentic existence so schematically. The four "moments" just sketched remain tightly interwoven, moreover, both in Heidegger's phenomenology of authenticity and in the alternative "dialectic" of self-fulfillment Levinas develops through his immanent critique of Heidegger. For the sake of clarity, I shall nevertheless endeavor to explain these points in turn in the final section of this paper.²³

III. Levinas's Challenge

LET US BEGIN WITH LEVINAS'S CHALLENGE TO HEIDEGGER'S PHENOMENOLOGICAL DESCRIPTION of the self confronting itself in "death." Levinas emphasizes that, in Heidegger's phenomenology of authenticity, "death" reveals Dasein's indomitable "virility" and "lucidity." As he puts it in his 1946 lectures on *Time and the Other*:

Being toward death, in Heidegger's authentic existence, is a supreme lucidity and a supreme virility. It is Dasein's assumption of the uttermost possibility of existence, which precisely makes possible all other possibilities, and consequently makes possible the very feat of grasping a possibility—that is, it makes possible activity and freedom. (TO, p. 70)

I think Levinas's point, however strangely put, is basically sound. For Heidegger, death allows Dasein to experience its ownmost ability-to-be, an

inalienable *projecting* or *existing* (from *ek-sistere*, “standing out” into temporally-structured intelligibility) that survives the shipwreck of all one’s practical life-projects. This core volitional self which survives the collapse of its life-projects then finds itself able *resolutely* to reconnect to the world, lucidly choosing to project itself into a defining project once again. Levinas contests precisely this view, contending that the global collapse of defining projects we experience in “death” should instead be understood as a paralyzing stroke which undoes the self’s power entirely, reducing the self to a state of radical passivity (TO, p. 70). Levinas nicely suggests that we can capture the basic difference between his view and Heidegger’s through a simple inversion of Heidegger’s famous formula: Whereas Heidegger understands death as “the possibility of an impossibility,” for Levinas death is instead “the impossibility of . . . possibility” (TI, p. 235). This is no mere rhetorical chiasmus; for Levinas, “[t]his apparently Byzantine distinction has a fundamental importance” (TO, p. 70, note 43), and not just because the two phrases are not logically equivalent.²⁴ The significant difference between “the possibility of an impossibility” and “the impossibility of all possibility” is *phenomenological*, although this will take some explaining.

We can see how Heidegger’s and Levinas’s phenomenologies of “death” initially part ways²⁵ if we remember that, for Heidegger, when my projects all break-down or collapse, leaving me without any life-project to project myself upon, projection itself does not cease.²⁶ When my being-possible becomes impossible, I still *am* this inability-to-be. My ability-to-be becomes blind, unable to connect to my world, but not *inert*. This strange condition—in which, stranded by the collapse of my life projects, I experience myself as a *projecting* deprived of any life-projects to project into—is what Heidegger characterizes as “the possibility of an impossibility,” or *death*. In Heidegger’s words:

Death, as possibility, gives Dasein nothing to be “actualized,” nothing which Dasein could itself actually *be*. It is the possibility of the impossibility of every way of comporting oneself toward anything, of every way of existing. (BT, p. 307/S&Z, p. 262)

For Heidegger, in “death” I experience myself as cut off from a world I nevertheless strive desperately to reach, and so encounter my self as a naked “thrown projection,” a brute “that-is-is-and-has-to-be.” Dreyfus helpfully comments that: “In non-terminal breakdown [that is, death not accompanied by demise or other apparently permanent forms of world collapse], Dasein as an ability-to-be does, indeed, collapse, but something remains aware of the collapse and survives to open the new world.” As Dreyfus sees, this “raises the difficult question: Just what survives world or identity-collapse so as to be aware that collapse has occurred” and subsequently reconnect to the world? Dreyfus’s answer to this question of what survives in Heideggerian “death” is: “naked thrownness or [in Heidegger’s words] the that-it-is-and-has-to-be.” Of course, “that-it-is-and-has-to-be” (my emphasis) is not only “naked thrownness” but also naked *projection*, in other words, pure “ability-to-be” (*Seinkönnen*) deprived of all “being possible” (*Möglichkeitsein*), all the positive projects one usually projects oneself into and understands oneself in terms of (teacher, husband, father, citizen, pet-owner, and so on). Accordingly, what survives the “death” of its projects,

Dreyfus rightly adds, is Dasein as “an individualized *solus ipse* [a “self alone”], . . . pure, isolated, world-needy mineness.” Again, if we do not fail to notice Dasein’s *having-to-be*, its *world-neediness*, then we will see that its “ability-to-be,” its *projecting*, is precisely what does *not* collapse, but merely gets stranded, separated from its “being-possible,” its self-constituting projects. Dasein is “collapsed” in death in the sense that it cannot do what it normally does (it cannot reinflate or otherwise reconnect to its collapsed world), not in the sense that it stops trying or gives up entirely.²⁷ If this is right, then one can get a sense for the phenomenon Heidegger is describing as “the possibility of an impossibility” by generalizing from more common experiences such as an identity crisis, an anxiety attack, the work of mourning, a serious case of writer’s block, or an experience of genuine philosophical *aporia*, or even (as Pippin nicely suggests) the lonely isolation of old age, insofar as each of these experiences is characterized by a desperate striving for what no longer seems possible, a struggle to project oneself into identity-bestowing existential possibilities experienced as no longer within one’s reach.²⁸

By contrast, I would like to suggest, we can approach the phenomenon Levinas calls “death”—which he describes as “the impossibility of every possibility, the stroke of a total passivity” (TI, p. 235)—by considering a severe depressive episode, in which the depressed person completely gives up and, for a time at least, no longer even tries to reconnect to her world. For Levinas, in a telling critique of Heidegger, death is not “the inanity” of “a paralytic’s freedom” (TI, p. 241), that is, the ability to try to do what has become impossible, but rather a kind of “suffocation in the impossibility of the possible” (TI, p. 57). The experience of “death” delivers the stroke of a paralyzing passivity, rendering the self utterly powerless, helpless even to “assume” death (*ibid.*). Desperately unable to cross, under my own steam, “the infinitesimal—but untraversable—distance” that now separates me from the future (*ibid.*), I suffer death’s *impossibility*: “The death agony is precisely this impossibility of ceasing” (TI, p. 56), that is, of eradicating the paralyzed remainder of self left over in death. It is thus telling that Levinas translates Heidegger’s *Angst* not as *anxiété*, “anxiety,” but rather as “*angoisse*,” “anguish,” which suggests a deeper torment, suffered more passively: “No exit,” but also no hope of ever finding one by oneself.²⁹ In his early work, moreover, Levinas suggests another phenomenon remarkably similar to the anguish of being unable to cease, namely, “insomnia,” an experience in which I remain riveted to the world, unable even to let go, and increasingly without hope of ever getting beyond or escaping the experience.³⁰

What, then, are we to make of this subtle but important disagreement between Heidegger and Levinas over the phenomenology of “death”? One tempting supposition would be that Levinas, as a phenomenologist similarly trained in the Husserlian school, sought to undergo and so experience first-hand the same phenomenon Heidegger had described in *Being and Time*, only to find himself stuck in what Heidegger called *anticipation* (or running-out), completely unable to pick himself up, as it were, and accomplish the autonomous reconnection to the world that Heidegger called resoluteness. So, when an alternative (Biblical) route back to the world occurred to Levinas (a route that perhaps took shape during his intensive tutelage with his famous Talmudic teacher, master Chouchani), he made it the basis of his own competing phenomenological account of self-

fulfillment. (Here, moreover, the way Levinas challenges Heidegger's secular, neo-enlightenment ideal of autonomous salvation implicitly raises the question of the relation in Levinas's work between his phenomenological descriptions and his religious commitments, a question I must leave in parentheses here.)³¹ Alternatively, those of us inclined to psychological as well as phenomenological explanations might suppose that, rather than treating Heidegger's *active but paralyzed striving* and Levinas's *passive and suffocating collapse* as offering us competing descriptions of the same phenomenon, we should instead recognize these as powerfully evocative descriptions of two different psychological experiences involving world-collapse, that is, in the most brutally simplified terms, Heideggerian *anxiety* and Levinasian *depression*. (That explanation, moreover, opens another set of difficult questions about how to understand the relationship between phenomenology and psychology.)³² Nonetheless, however we account for it, we are witness here to a subtle but important fork in the road of the tradition of continental phenomenology, one which, we will see, continues to diverge until it becomes a major parting of the ways between Heidegger and Levinas (and which will exert a competing pull on such subsequent continental wayfarers as Derrida and Agamben).

To trace and examine this growing divide, let us turn to their second major difference, visible in Levinas's alternative understanding of the nature of the crucial insight afforded by the self's confrontation with death. I pointed out that for Heidegger, confronting death enables us to discover something about us that remains "more powerful" than death, an aspect of the self—our basic existential *projecting*—which does not go down with the shipwreck of our life-projects but rather survives for as long as do each of our individual *Daseins*, a volitional core of the self from the perspective of which we can then "choose" to reconnect to the world. Levinas, by contrast, thinks that when the approach of death renders us utterly *powerless*, what we discover—in the "passion" of this radical passivity—is that it is only through another person that we have any chance of passing through death into the future that death places beyond our reach.³³ According to Levinas, to recognize the other person as the only vessel capable of transporting us through "death" into the future is, at the same time,³⁴ to understand other people as the sole bearers of "what is not yet," that is, of otherness in general. Now Levinas is usually misunderstood here and taken to be insisting that, contrary to Heidegger's explicit claim in *Being and Time*, we do have access to death through other people. In fact, however, Levinas's critique of Heidegger is basically the reverse: Levinas is not claiming that we have access to death through other people but, rather, that we gain access to the crucial dimension of alterity—including the alterity of the other person—through the experience of death. Here we encounter perhaps the most difficult and distinctive claim of Levinas's phenomenology: Death reveals "alterity" (*altérité*), the link invisibly "connecting" (*religio*) the "other person" (*autrui*) with "otherness" (*autre*) in general.

Levinas's defining claim, in other words, is that *through the experience of death we encounter the alterity of the other person*.³⁵ This "alterity" of the other person is what Levinas famously refers to as the "face" (*Visage*), which is his name for the intersection of otherness and the other person. The term "face" is misleading, however, because this alterity is not experienced visually, but

rather linguistically, through what Levinas calls “discourse” or “apology.” That is, the “face” is not what I see when I look at you (and even less when I look in the mirror, since Levinas thinks, rather implausibly in my view, that—except by becoming an other person—I cannot be other to myself, no more than I can tickle or surprise myself). Instead, the face is what I experience when you speak to me or otherwise communicate your viewpoint and thereby add something new or different to the discussion and so to my sense of the world. When the other person thus explains or clarifies her views, she *brings something new into existence*, and in this sense shows herself (to be made, as it were) “in the image of God,” the Creator—hence Levinas’s choice of the misleading term “face.” In sum, for Levinas otherness “is” only when it is revealed through the other person, and this is a revelation I can experience only when this other person says or does something that alters my world.

With this background in place, we are positioned to see that when Levinas makes his crucial claim that *through the experience of death we encounter the otherness of the other person*, his point is two-fold: First, that through death we explicitly experience the capacity of the other person to change us, to alter our world, and second, that through death we experience ourselves becoming other to ourselves, that is, we experience our self become another, different self.³⁶ In the strange experience of death, these two points are connected; I become other to myself through the experience of that which remains different, surprising, able to change me—or, as Levinas says simply, “other”—about the other person, who helps me find a way forward which I could not have found on my own. It is thus through our experience of the otherness of the other person in death that we learn to become other to ourselves, to become another person. How exactly does Levinas think this happens?

Here we reach the third major difference between Heidegger’s and Levinas’s competing phenomenologies of authentic self-fulfillment. Levinas challenges Heidegger’s account of how the self can live through the death of a world and then come to reconnect to a world. For Heidegger, “resolve” builds upon the bare projecting revealed by death; in a second-order decision (a “choosing to choose,” as he puts it), this unsinkable core of the self is able to reconnect to a world by lucidly or explicitly projecting into a defining project.³⁷ If Heidegger thereby suggests that the best response to the anxiety-like phenomenon he describes is basically to “tough it out,” that is, to confront it, dig deeper, and find a way to get past it, Levinas himself insists that one simply cannot get oneself out of the depression-like phenomenon he evokes, indeed, that here one’s only hope is to be saved by someone else, through what he calls “love” or *Eros*.³⁸ Levinas believes that the self can reconnect to the world only by giving itself over to another person—paradigmatically a “teacher” or “master”—with whom this self can grope, in conversation, toward a future it cannot yet comprehend.³⁹ Although I think the pedagogical, religious, and psychoanalytic implications of Levinas’s view remain extremely suggestive, what is confusing for many readers here is that, in good Platonic fashion, Levinas’s descriptions of this process of transformation trade heavily on erotic metaphors, which his feminist critics especially have long insisted on literalizing, thereby obscuring Levinas’s ultimate point.⁴⁰ For, when Levinas describes the way the “caress”—which “grope” toward something it

cannot reach or understand rather than *grasping* something it can—enables me to find a way through the “fecundity” of the “feminine” so as, ultimately, to live on in my “child” (indeed, my “son”), Levinas is not simply using sexist language to describe from his masculine perspective the way that, as Plato suggested, those “impoverished in soul” seek to live on in their children. Levinas’s erotic metaphors do work on that level, which he characterizes as the level of “biology,” but—as he repeatedly emphasizes (TI pp. 277, 279)—this biological substrate of human life is only Levinas’s own version of what Heidegger calls our *ontic* everyday reality, the deeper *ontological* meaning of which both seek to describe phenomenologically, and to almost the same effect. In other words, Levinas uses his conditionally sexist but biologically accurate metaphors to try to describe how the self, rendered powerless by death, can nevertheless find a path to the future, in which it will be reborn as a radically different person.⁴¹ But *different* in what way?

This question brings us to their fourth and final difference, in which Levinas opposes Heidegger’s description of how the self who finds a way back to the world is transformed by the adventure. Although Dreyfus rightly suggests that there are actually degrees of such fulfillment that Heidegger has yet to recognize in *Being and Time*, Heidegger’s early view is that the authentic self becomes itself fully by seizing its “fate” and thereby helping to shape the communal “destiny” of its generation. It does this through a creative “repetition” of projects drawn from the past which enable this self to establish the relatively continuous identity of itself and its community.⁴² Levinas, by clear contrast, thinks that we become ourselves fully only by being reborn as another person, a person who is radically different from his or her previous self-conception. This is accomplished through a “transubstantiation” in which I am reborn as the “son” of myself and so transformed into a radically *other-directed* self. Levinas thinks that this newborn *ethical* self will recognize the paramount importance of the alterity of the other person (glimpsed in and understood through death), and so become committed to a dispersed community of ethical individuals dedicated to serving, eliciting, and respecting the alterity of other people.⁴³ This is an ethical community committed to bringing newness into the world, and so dedicated to the future, to continual transformation, and, ultimately, to serving others as “teachers” of this “permanent revolution” of “incessant death and resurrection.”

What this all shows, I think, is that the endpoints of the structurally analogous processes of death and rebirth described by the early Heidegger and by Levinas remain worlds apart. Indeed, their visions of self-fulfillment are almost inverted images. For the Heidegger of *Being and Time*, we genuinely become ourselves, realize our greatest possible ethical fulfillment, through the self’s *revolutionary* return to and repossession of itself. For Levinas, by contrast, we become ourselves fully only by making a literally *eccentric* passage in which the center of our being is moved outside our selves: I become myself by learning to be for others. Early Heideggerian self-fulfillment describes the path of an existential odyssey that brings us full circle back to ourselves by first turning us away from the world in which we are usually immersed and then turning us back to this world in a more reflective way. The “victory over death” Levinas evokes through his “phenomenology of Eros”—whereby I become “resurrected,” “transubstantiated” into the son of myself—contrasts sharply with Heidegger’s

circular odyssey. For Levinas, through “*Eros*,” “a subject. . . goes toward a future which is *not yet* and which I will not merely grasp but I *will be*—it no longer has the structure of the subject which from every adventure returns to its island, like Ulysses” (TI, p. 271).

How, then, are we to evaluate all of these differences (which become even more complicated if we introduce the later Heidegger into the discussion)? I hope others will help me with that rather large question, but since my expression of that hope might be taken precipitously as a confirmation of Levinas’s ethical perspective (since Levinas suggests that we can be helped through genuine philosophical aporias only by the other person), I shall also conclude by proposing—so as to bring us back into the vicinity, at least, of the political issues with which we began—that Levinas’s most famous criticism of Heidegger rebounds upon his own view.⁴⁴ Levinas famously objects that Heideggerian authenticity fails to secure itself against totalitarian violence, but it is hard to see how Levinas’s own indiscriminate embrace of alterity—by which he means all as of yet unknown experiences of human otherness—can itself rule out *anything* different, new, or creative. Unfortunately for Levinas’s guiding ethical intuition, not everything different, creative, or new is *good* (although the temptation to think so is a perennial danger for those of us on the Left; one thinks here for instance of Foucault’s enthusiastic reaction to the rise of Islamic theocracy, as well as of home-grown reactionaries celebrating the surprise attacks of September 11th).⁴⁵

In other words, Levinas’s equation of ethics with alterity is much too quick. His indiscriminate ethicization of everything human beings create that is new, original, unheard, different, or surprising is too broad to serve ethics very well, for it fails to distinguish between good and bad surprises, to put it simply. It does not help us distinguish, for example, between those intense surprises which, even if they wound us initially, eventually help us grow better, and those which traumatize us, never to heal, permanently stunting our ethical growth (as September 11th seems to have done in the United States by reversing the erratic but undeniable progress our liberal democratic institutions had been making).⁴⁶ The problem here, to put it provocatively, is that if the Holocaust or *Shoah* was historically unique, that is, if through it something new, surprising, or unprecedented was indeed introduced into human history (as many of us believe), then the question with which we began returns with renewed insistence: Is Levinas’s ethical perspective really the most appropriate philosophical response to the Holocaust or *Shoah*? However inspiring his view remains, what ethical traction does it provide with which we might help combat or resist the outbreak of other political horrors, now and in the future?⁴⁷ ¶

Notes

¹ I presented earlier versions of this paper to the International Society for Phenomenological Studies in Asilomar, California on 28 June 2005, and to the Colloquium on Contemporary European Philosophy at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah on 1 December 2005. For helpful comments and criticisms, I would like to thank Bill Blattner, Taylor Carman, Dave Cerbone, Steve Crowell, Bert Dreyfus, Charlie Guignon, John Haugeland, Piotr Hoffman, Michael Jennings, Stephan Käufer, Sean Kelly, Christina Lafont, Leslie MacAvoy, Jeff Malpas, Wayne Martin, Mark Okrent, Robert Pippin, Joe Rouse, Charles Siewert, Ted Schatzki, Hans Sluga, and Mark Wrathall.

¹See Hans Sluga, *Heidegger's Crisis: Philosophy and Politics in Nazi Germany* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), pp. 186-93.

²It is true that Heidegger never made a public apology for his Nazi affiliation, a deeply unfortunate matter I have discussed in "On the Advantages and Disadvantages of Reading Heidegger Backward: White's *Time and Death*," *Inquiry* 50:1 (2007), pp. 113, 119-20 note 25; and "From the Question Concerning Technology to the Quest for a Democratic Technology: Heidegger, Marcuse, Feenberg," *Inquiry*, 43:2 (2000), p. 205. Traditionally, however, critics of Heidegger's notorious "silence" advance the broader allegation that Heidegger never addressed the significance of the Holocaust or *Shoah* in any of his later public speeches or writings and, as I show below, this more damning allegation is false.

³See Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe*, Vol. 79: *Bremer und Freiburger Vorträge*, Petra Jaeger, ed. (Frankfurt: V. Klostermann, 1994), p. 56. For a more detailed discussion of this difficult and troubling matter, see *Heidegger on Ontotheology: Technology and the Politics of Education* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), esp. pp. 82-3.

⁴See Heidegger, "The 'Letter on Humanism,'" in W. McNeill, ed., *Pathmarks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 271.

⁵When Levinas claims that his ethical perspective is more fundamental than Heidegger's ontological thinking, his main target is Heidegger's *Being and Time* claim that our only access to "entities"—that is, to anything that in any way "is," including other people—comes through a prior understanding of the *being* of those entities. This, however, is a claim to which later Heidegger no longer subscribes, as I show in Ch. 1 of *Heidegger on Ontotheology*.

⁶I develop the former argument in "Ontology and Ethics at the Intersection of Phenomenology and Environmental Philosophy," *Inquiry* 47:4 (2004), pp. 380-412.

⁷The seminal text here is Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Heidegger, Art, and Politics: The Fiction of the Political* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), but the most plausible version of the view can be found in Fred Dallmayr's *The Other Heidegger* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993). Nonetheless, the metaphors of infection remain alarming here, given their central role in the paranoid and biologicist eugenic views at least partly responsible for the Holocaust.

⁸But does not the same criticism also hold true of Arendt's remarkably similar views concerning the "industrialization of death" (in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*) and "the banality of evil" (in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*), as well as of Horkheimer and Adorno's understanding of Auschwitz as the end result of enlightenment rationality gone mad through its own fulfillment (in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*)? I find more convincing Horkheimer and Adorno's suggestion (in the same text) that Nazi anti-Semitism should be understood as the scapegoating of a symbolic figure in whom were concentrated the worst excesses of capitalist-industrial modernization, so that the elimination of "the Jew" could substitute for a critique of the system actually responsible for the worst suffering associated with industrialization. Still, the question Arendt (among many others) raised as to why the Nazis fixated on the figure of "the Jew" remains an important one. Adorno's views on the historical role Jews played in spreading Roman jurisprudence and, later, owing to the Christian prohibitions on usury, in international banking, while problematic, at least address the question in its specificity. For an interesting development of Arendt's initial analysis of the historical dimension of this question, see Enzo Traverso, *The Origins of Nazi Violence* (New York: The New Press, 2003).

⁹On Heidegger's view of America's military-industrial complex as a fulfillment of the underlying logic behind the Nazis's "total mobilization" for war, see my "Understanding Technology Ontotheologically, or: The Danger and the Promise of Heidegger, an American Perspective" (in Jan-Kyrre Berg Olsen, Evan Selinger, and Søren Riis, eds, *New Waves in the Philosophy of Technology* [New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009]). On Arendt's important point (in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*) that by the end of the war the resources the Nazis poured into the Holocaust were clearly undermining rather than serving their war effort, see Robert Pippin's insightful essay, "Hannah Arendt and the Bourgeois Origins of Totalitarian Evil" (in *The Persistence of Subjectivity: On the Kantian Aftermath* [New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005]). Levinas tries to make some philosophical sense of this troubling question (without making explicit that this is what he is doing) in his discussion of the relation between "murder" and the "face," where he suggests that Nazi genocide reached such terrible proportions because it was desperately trying to do the impossible, namely, to eliminate the very possibility of a different future (in

this case, a future in which Nazi power would have come to an end and the Nazis would be judged for their crimes, and so a future in which, Levinas suggests, the Jewish people would be the privileged witness). See Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, A. Lingis, trans. (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), pp. 197-201; hereafter referred to as "TI."

¹⁰And the debate continues as to which would be worse: If the *Shoah* could not be understood rationally, or if it could—a divisive issue that pits, e.g., Adorno against Agamben and the earlier Arendt of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* against the later Arendt of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.

¹¹Doing so, moreover, bestows the traditional philosophical advantage of allowing us to understand their important disagreements by situating them against the background of the still too infrequently recognized common ground which, I shall try to show here, underlies their philosophical projects as a whole. (Of course, I can only speak to a small but important piece of this larger project here.)

¹²See Heidegger's "Preface" to William Richardson, *Through Phenomenology to Thought* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1967), p. xiv-xv. This distinguishes Heideggerian repetition (concerning which, see my "Deconstructing the Hero," in Jeff McLaughlin, ed., *Comics as Philosophy* [Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005]) from Benjaminian Marxian-messianic repetition, which stresses the need to actualize potentials in history that were betrayed by their own development, as liberalism supposedly betrayed the universal liberation glimpsed in the French revolution.

¹³See John Haugeland, "Truth and Finitude: Heidegger's Transcendental Existentialism," in Mark Wrathall and Jeff Malpas, eds., *Heidegger, Authenticity, and Modernity: Essays in Honor of Hubert L. Dreyfus*, Volume 1 (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2000), p. 44. The reason death plays such a crucial role in *Being and Time*, in a nutshell, is that the experience of the phenomenon Heidegger calls "death" discloses "futurity," which is itself the first horizon we encounter of originary temporality, that fundamental structure which makes possible any understanding of being at all. The problem for the phenomenologist, as Heidegger recognizes, is that the experience by which we come to understand what he means by "death" (an experience of "'real' anxiety") is both quite "rare" and extremely difficult to endure. (See Heidegger, *Being and Time*, J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson, trans. [New York: Harper & Row, 1962], p. 234 / *Sein und Zeit* [Tübingen: M. Niemeyer Verlag, 1993], p. 190; hereafter referred to as "BT/SZ.") The requirement that we must undergo this experience for ourselves in order to testify for or against the adequacy of Heidegger's analysis of it thus seems excessively demanding; Heidegger himself acknowledges that this demand "remains, from the existentiell point of view [that is, from the perspective of our everyday lives], a fantastically unreasonable demand [*eine phantastische Zumutung*]" (BT, p. 311 / SZ, p. 266). Nonetheless, without experiencing the phenomenon at issue for ourselves, we can at best approach Heidegger's phenomenological descriptions of death from the outside and so find them, for example, suggestive, impressive, or deep-sounding, or perhaps fanciful, idiosyncratic, or even absurd. It is thus revealing to contrast this kind of superficial evaluation—typical of but not limited to neophyte readings of *Being and Time*—with the critical interpretations advanced in the 1940s by Heidegger's first "existentialist" readers, especially Levinas but also, to a lesser degree, Sartre. Both sought to contest and revise Heidegger's phenomenology of death by drawing on their own experiences of the phenomenon at issue or, in the case of Sartre (who would later boast that he had never experienced "anguish" himself), his experience of an alternative phenomenon, namely, "the look of the other [person]," which is similarly supposed to result in "the death of my [existential] possibilities". See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, H. E. Barnes, trans. (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956 [original 1943]), pp. 247, 264; Jean-Paul Sartre and Benny Lévy, *Hope Now: The 1980 Interviews*, A. van den Hoven, trans. [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996], p. 55; cf. 108; and Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, R. A. Cohen, trans. (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987 [original 1947]; hereafter referred to as "TO").

¹⁴See my "Heidegger's Perfectionist Philosophy of Education in *Being and Time*," *Continental Philosophy Review* 37:4 (2004), pp. 439-467, and my "Death and Demise in *Being and Time*," in Mark A. Wrathall, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Being and Time* (New York: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming 2010).

¹⁵What I will suggest is that the question most fundamentally at issue, first between Heidegger and Levinas, and then between the other important continental thinkers influenced by their disagreement, is this: What does it mean to become oneself, to become *genuinely* or *fully* oneself? One of the larger philosophical questions I am interested in concerns how the great traumas of

the twentieth century have changed the political implications of this *perfectionist* question, and so transformed our ways of thinking about it.

¹⁶ See "Heidegger's Perfectionist Philosophy of Education in *Being and Time*."

¹⁷ My main goal will simply be to try to set out its terms as clearly as possible. Immediately complicating matters, however, is the fact that, although Levinas usually criticizes "Heidegger" as if thereby designating a fixed philosophical view or position, there are really at least three different views of what is entailed in genuinely or fully becoming oneself at issue here. For, not only do Heidegger's and Levinas's phenomenological descriptions of self-fulfillment diverge radically from one another, as we will see, but Heidegger's own view undergoes a profound transformation between his early and later work (as I show in *Heidegger on Ontotheology*). Still, I shall bracket the later Heidegger's understanding of self-fulfillment here, for reasons of space and because I think the best way to understand this three-way disagreement is to situate it against what is in fact its common background in the early Heidegger's phenomenological description of how one becomes authentic, and of the roles played by "death" and "resolve" in the secular conversion whereby one becomes such an authentic self.

¹⁸ Anticipation is to expectation as anxiety is to fear, so we can begin to understand the former by thinking of the latter deprived of an object (e.g., an expectation that does not know what it is so nervously expecting, or a fear that is literally afraid of *nothing*).

¹⁹ I should perhaps qualify my claim that we are "involuntarily" turned away from the world. In an illuminating discussion of death, Robert Pippin observes that: "We are simply not 'in charge' of whether care fails or not or how to think our way into our out of such an experience." (See Pippin, *The Persistence of Subjectivity*, p. 71.) I shall suggest that Pippin's view is actually closer to Levinas than Heidegger, since Heidegger thinks we can precipitate world-collapse by unflinchingly confronting our anxiety. (We cannot directly make our worlds collapse, no more than we can directly make ourselves sneeze, but just as we can indirectly make ourselves sneeze, by pulling out a nose hair, e.g., so Heidegger thinks we can indirectly make our worlds collapse by confronting our anxiety and tracing it back to our basic existential homelessness or "uncanniness" (*Unheimlichkeit*), the fact that there is nothing about the ontological structure of the self that can tell us what specifically we should do with our lives. I explain this view in "Heidegger's Perfectionist Philosophy of Education.") Heidegger also believes that we can get beyond this world collapse through resolve. Between these two important decisions, however, I think he would acknowledge that the experience takes on a momentum of its own, that we reach a point of no return in our confrontation with anxiety after which we can no longer choose to flee this anxiety back into the tranquilizing hurry of everyday busyness.

²⁰ If this is right, however, it constitutes a fairly devastating objection to the many Levinasians who seek to understand Levinas without recourse to Heidegger.

²¹ This reading of Heidegger, most prominently developed by Cavell, can be traced back to the early Heidegger's Catholic colleagues in the Marburg circle around Bultmann. On the latter point, see Joachim L. Oberst, *Heidegger on Language and Death: The Intrinsic Connection* (London: Continuum, 2009).

²² This is central to Levinas's broader philosophical project (which I cannot develop here); indeed, he calls the confrontation with death "the ineluctable moment of my dialectic" (TO, p. 92).

²³ I hope that this will help us understand Levinas's differences from Heidegger in a way that leaves room for the fact that some of his views—both his criticisms of Heidegger and his own positive alternatives—remain more plausible than others.

²⁴ As one can see by formalizing the two phrases, "the possibility of an impossibility" is not logically equivalent to "the impossibility of possibility." The latter is logically equivalent to "necessarily not possible," which is obviously not the same as the former's equivalent, "possibly not possible." The point could also be expressed in possible worlds semantics: "There is a possible world in which (there is no possible world in which X)" is not logically equivalent to "there is no possible world in which (there is a possible world in which X)." Still, one should not be misled; Heidegger has existential rather than logical possibility in mind here, and so is seeking to make a phenomenological point.

²⁵ To be clear, I am not claiming that this is the starting point of Levinas's critique of Heidegger. Strictly speaking, Levinas's critique begins with an interesting but rather implausible challenge to Heidegger's notion of thrownness: Levinas seeks to get back behind our thrownness so as to begin

his account from a foundationless *Il y a*, an “anonymous” existing without an existent. It is in this sense that, as Hoy recognizes, “Levinas still aspires to ‘first philosophy,’ that is, to a foundationalist account of human existence.” (See David Hoy, *Critical Resistance: From Poststructuralism to Post-Critique* [Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2004], p. 149.) What Hoy (like most commentators) does not notice is that, in so doing, Levinas is seeking to redeem a Biblical understanding of *Genesis* (i.e., the entrance of being into time), the successive moments of which (creation, the garden, eating of the tree of knowledge, nakedness and shame, and so on) provide the skeletal framework of the original phenomenological “dialectic” Levinas unfolds and develops in his main philosophical works (*Time and the Other*, *Totality and Infinity*, and *Otherwise than Being*). I think Levinas’s still largely unnoticed attempt to read the *Torah* as containing a progressive account of the ontological fulfillment of self (one which leads the self beyond itself, as we will see) is what ultimately explains what Hoy rightly recognizes as Levinas’s attempt “to be even more fundamental than phenomenology” (*ibid.*, 162).

²⁶ See Stephen Crowell, “Subjectivity: Locating the First-Person in *Being and Time*,” *Inquiry* 44:4 (2001), 433-54.

²⁷ See Hubert L. Dreyfus’s “Foreword” to Carol J. White, *Time and Death: Heidegger’s Analysis of Finitude*, Mark Ralkowski, ed. (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), p. xxxv; xxxv note 59.

²⁸ See Pippin, *The Persistence of Subjectivity*, p. 165. As Pippin explains, Arendt saw totalitarianism as a “suicidal escape” from this dead end. (As an Hegelian much more committed to than alienated by the modern world, Pippin contests Arendt’s Heideggerian tendency to equate such deadening experiences with modern bourgeois society in general.) For the early Heidegger, the “way out” of this deadlock is resolute *action* (a view obviously influential on Arendt, who, as the muse of *Being and Time*, knew the work well); for Levinas, it is, ultimately, *teaching* (giving a new, phenomenological meaning to the old saw, “Those who can’t do, teach”).

²⁹ See Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*, B. Bergo, trans. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000); unfortunately, the translator decided to override Levinas’s far from irrelevant decision (see p. 251 note 3).

³⁰ In Levinas’s early work, however, the phenomenon of insomnia is supposed to attest to an experience in which the (post-hypostasis) subject, who has individuated itself from the anonymous “existing without an existent” of the *Il y a*, nevertheless maintains some experiential access to that pre-subjective experience of anonymous existing, and so can attest to it phenomenologically. Insomnia is thus the lynchpin in Levinas’s attempt to get back behind Dasein’s thrownness to a more radical (neo-Cartesian) starting point, to undercut Heidegger’s *Being and Time* claim that Dasein cannot get back behind its thrownness.

³¹ I shall suggest that the specific way Levinas’s phenomenology challenges Heidegger’s neo-enlightenment ideal of self-salvation obliquely raises the issue of the crucial but typically unnoticed relation between his phenomenological works and his Talmudic scholarship, fields Levinas misleadingly claims he has kept separate (see also note 25 above). Foucault points out, however, that the idea of “[n]ot being able to take care of oneself without help from someone else was a generally accepted principle” among the ancient Epicureans, Cynics, and Stoics. See Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981-1982*, Frédéric Gros, ed., G. Burchell, trans. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 496.

³² Do phenomenology and psychology range over the same experiences? If so, do they have the same “object domain”? Can one be subordinated or reduced to the other? What is the place of the *unconscious* in phenomenology? And so on.

³³ As Levinas’s metaphors suggest, at this point in his “dialectic” he is articulating a fundamentally *Christian* phenomenology, which might help explain his attraction of Catholic followers such as Jean-Luc Marion. I cannot here explain Levinas’s larger “dialectic of being,” in which “death” constitutes “the ineluctable moment,” but the earlier moments of his dialectic—in which Levinas seeks to get back behind thrownness to the anonymous existing which precedes existents (that is, God before the creation)—are inspired by *Genesis*, and it is here that Levinas explicitly seek to attain a deeper foundation (for his “first philosophy”) than Heidegger thought was possible. Nevertheless, Levinas’s next move establishes the metaphysical *humanism* definitive of his work (the view, put simply, that God is only in the ethical relationship between human beings), which places his phenomenology in the closest proximity to *atheism*, at least as traditionally-conceived (see note 35 below). Moreover, although the paradigm of the salvation

Levinas describes may be Christ, for Levinas it is exemplified by the “master” or “teacher” more generally, and can clearly happen inadvertently as well (e.g., when the famous comments of a passing music teacher to his student—“Too tight and the strings will break; too loose and the instrument will not play”—enabled Prince Siddhartha finally to attain the enlightenment of the middle way.)

³⁴ “The time of an impossible diachrony,” Levinas likes to say, so as to suggest the splitting of the subject in two, father and son, and the transubstantiation by which I survive only in (and as) my own son.

³⁵ Levinas’s distinctive claim concerning the relation between other people and otherness has not been well understood, especially in its relation to death. In his implicitly “religious” phenomenology (*religious* because it discerns and describes *connections* that, Levinas insists, remain invisible—even non-phenomenal—and yet “reveal” themselves nonetheless, and thus constitute a kind of non-phenomenal revelation, a paradoxical notion to be sure), the key insight, put simply, is that *only the other person reveals otherness in general*. This is the claim at the heart of Levinas’s *metaphysical humanism*, a view by which he seeks to negotiate a safe path between what are for him the Scylla and Charybdis of *idolatry* and *atheism*. As Levinas describes these dual dangers, to approach the absolute as absolute, that is, as *non-relative*, would be to have no relation to it; this would be “atheism” (TI, p. 58). Conversely, to have a relation with the absolute is to risk the *idolatry* of treating that through which we relate to the absolute as it were itself the absolute. (Levinas variously refers to the “absolute” as “infinity,” “alterity,” “exteriority,” and even “God”). Now what makes this dual danger of atheism or idolatry look like an inescapable double-bind is Levinas’s metaphysical humanism, his distinctive claim that *otherness is revealed only through “the face” of the other person*. Yet, because he holds that otherness “is” only through the other person—that the absolute “is” only in its relation to us; that God “is” only in and through relations between human beings; that otherness “is” only when the other person alters our world—it is not clear how Levinas can avoid both atheism and idolatry, and, indeed, his metaphysical humanism seems to enter into a perilous proximity to both. Reconstructing Levinas’s interesting but rather tortuous logic would take us too far afield here, but it is clear that “the face of the other”—which essentially connects, and yet somehow does not conflate, the other person and otherness in general—acts as the fulcrum for Levinas’s rather delicate balancing act between atheism and idolatry. Still, Levinas’s *humanism* looks like (a more traditional conception of) “atheism” in that he refuses to conceive of *infinity* as a noun. (“Infinity does not first exist, and then reveal itself. Its infinity is produced as revelation” (TI, p. 26).) For Levinas, the infinite is only in the act of “*infinition*,” i.e., in breaking the plane of the currently existing finite totality so that something new may enter into the world. Moreover, the *totality* of what is (what Levinas calls “history”) immediately assimilates anything new; for even to appear it must appear for us, here, within what is. So “God” exists only in the (non-historical) time of “diachrony,” in which the instant opens the existing totality to something which exceeds it. What is most important for us here, however, is to recognize that Levinas’s metaphysical humanism—his view that *otherness is revealed only through “the face” of the other person*—is both (1) the crucial insight he thinks the experience of death reveals and (2) the thesis that most clearly distinguishes his ethical thinking from that of the later Heidegger, who held that human beings have access to alterity not only through other people, but also (and, indeed, paradigmatically, in his thinking about poetry) through a relationship to non-human “things.”

³⁶ This is what Levinas means when he writes that: “An event happens to us . . . without our being able to have the least project. This approach of death indicates that we are in relation with something that is absolutely other, something bearing alterity not as a provisional determination we can assimilate through enjoyment, but as something whose very existence is made of alterity. My solitude is thus not confirmed by death but rather broken by it. Right away this means that existence is pluralist. Here the plurality is not a multitude of existents; it appears in existing itself. A plurality insinuates itself into the very existing of the existent . . . In death the existing of the existent is alienated.” (TO, p. 74-5) Or: “Death . . . is *present* only in the other person, and only in him does it summon me urgently to my final essence, to my responsibility” (TI, p. 179).

³⁷ How is this supposed to work, and how does Heidegger’s account of the resolute decision avoid the charge of arbitrary decisionism? The account is complex, but as I explain in detail in “Heidegger’s Perfectionist Philosophy of Education,” the recognition that (1) there is nothing

about the structure of the self laid bare in death which can tell me what project to choose enables me (2) to give up the paralyzing idea that there is a single correct choice to make, thereby (3) freeing me to select and update an exemplary life-project from the tradition which allows me to employ my factual skills and aptitudes in a way that (4) helps me to play a role in determining and shaping the issues that matter to my generation.

³⁸It is tempting nonetheless to explain Levinas's version of the "triumph over death" ("love, stronger than death") in terms of an experience, in death, of alterity as the "sublime" (*Erhaben*), which "lifts up," out of depression (TI, p. 79).

³⁹As Levinas puts it: "The relationship with the other will never be the feat of grasping a possibility" (TO, p. 76). Instead, the relationship should be understood in terms of "the erotic relationship," as *groping* (i.e., "the caress") rather than *grasping*: "The caress does not know what it seeks. This not knowing, this fundamental disorder, is the essential. It is like a game with something slipping away, a game absolutely without project or plan, not with what can become ours or us, but with something other, always other, always inaccessible, and always still to come [*à venir*]. The caress is the anticipation of this pure future [*avenir*], without content." (TO, p. 89)

⁴⁰This tendency toward reductive misunderstanding is almost as old as second wave feminism itself, since it originated in the preface to Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*.

⁴¹As Levinas says with respect to his concepts of the "son" and "fecundity": "the son is not me, and yet *I am* my son. The fecundity of the I is its very transcendence. The biological origin of the concept nowise neutralizes the paradox of its meaning, and delineates a structure that goes beyond the biologically empirical" (TI, p. 277). "If biology furnishes us the prototypes of these relations . . . these relations free themselves from their biological limitations" (TI, p. 279). "*To be one's son means to be I in one's son, to be substantially in him, yet without being maintained there in identity. Our whole analysis of fecundity aimed to establish this dialectical conjuncture, which conserves the two contradictory movements. The son resumes the unicity of the father and yet remains radically exterior to the father.*" (TI, pp. 278-9) Cf. Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time* Vol. V, C. K. S. Moncrieff and T. Kilmartin, trans. (New York: Random House, 2003), p. 805.

⁴²See BT 434-9/SZ 382-7. It makes perfect sense that Levinas would contest Heidegger's analysis at precisely this juncture, because it is here that *Being and Time* enters into its greatest proximity to some of the ideological currents of the burgeoning Nazi movement. I examine this important point in more detail in *Heidegger on Ontotheology*, Ch. 3, as well as in "Deconstructing the Hero" and "On the Advantages and Disadvantages of Reading Heidegger Backward."

⁴³In the definitive transformation by which we truly become ourselves, Levinas writes, "The I . . . the center around which [the subject's] existence gravitates, is confirmed in its singularity by purging itself of this gravitation, purges itself interminably, and is confirmed precisely in this incessant effort to purge itself. This is termed goodness. Perhaps the possibility of a point of the universe where such an overflow of responsibility is produced ultimately defines the I" (TI, pp. 244-5).

⁴⁴"'I think' comes down to 'I can' . . . Ontology as first philosophy is a philosophy of power. It issues in the State and in the non-violence of the totality, *without securing itself against the violence from which this non-violence lives*, and which appears in the tyranny of the state. Truth, which should reconcile persons, here exists anonymously" (TI, p. 46, my emphasis).

⁴⁵"The face to face is . . . the primordial production of being on which all the possible collocations of the terms are founded. The revelation of the third party, ineluctable in the face, is produced only through the face. Goodness . . . consists in going where no clarifying—that is, panoramic—thought precedes, in going without knowing where. An absolute adventure, in a primal imprudence, goodness is transcendence itself" (TI, p. 305).

⁴⁶An interesting test case can be found in Levinas's famous exchange with the Heidegger scholar Father William Richardson. (The basic story runs as follows: Levinas generously accepted Richardson's invitation to sit as an outside examiner on Richardson's thesis committee for his degree at Louvain, where Richardson defended the text that would become his renowned treatise on Heidegger, *Through Phenomenology to Thought*. During the long defense Levinas never raised the issue of Heidegger's Nazism, about which Richardson says he was prepared to respond. Afterward, during the rush of customary congratulations, Levinas came up behind Richardson, poked him sharply in the back, and then, when Richardson turned around expecting to shake Levinas's hand, Levinas instead said something like: "You say in your thesis that '1942 was a

very prolific year' . . . In 1942, my mother was in one concentration camp and my father was in another. It was a very prolific year indeed!" Levinas then spun on his heel and walked away, never to speak to Richardson again. Richardson recounts the story in several places, including his contribution to Babette Babich, ed., *From Phenomenology to Thought, Errancy, and Desire: Essays in Honor of William J. Richardson, S.J.* [New York: Springer, 1995]; I thank him for an extended conversation about it.) Perhaps the lesson to be drawn from this exchange is that, rather than representing a bizarre aberration to be explained away as an uncharacteristic outburst of anger on Levinas's part, Levinas's surprising attack on Richardson should instead be understood as an exemplary embodiment of his ethical view, a powerful example of what he called "the traumatism of the other." (And anyone who has read or heard Richardson's narration of these events will recognize that this is a trauma he has never fully worked-through.) Of course, one should also recognize that, as Salomon Malka points out: "It is nevertheless easy to imagine how reading a book of seven hundred pages on the evolution of Heidegger's thought without the least reference to his political involvement . . . could have been painful for Levinas," especially when this extremely galling sin of omission was committed by a Jesuit priest. (See Malka, *Emmanuel Levinas: His Life and Legacy*, M. Kigel and S. M. Embree, trans. [Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2006], p. 166.) Indeed, it is easy to imagine Levinas's indignation piqued by the then prevailing norms of scholarly propriety which worked to preclude any public discussion of Heidegger's complicity with the Nazis.

¹⁷I am not the only one to raise such worries. Even Derrida, who has long been one of Levinas's most sympathetic critics, pointedly objects to the troubling ethical blindness evident in Levinas's treatment of non-human animals: "The animal remains for Levinas what it will have been for the whole Cartesian-type tradition: a machine that doesn't speak, that doesn't have access to sense, that can at best imitate 'signifiers without a signified,' . . . a monkey with 'monkey talk,' precisely what the Nazis sought to reduce their Jewish prisoners to." Levinas's humanistic commitments seem to lead to a failure of moral empathy or imagination that prevents the great ethicist from responding to what Derrida recognizes as that "industrial, mechanical, chemical, hormonal, and genetic violence to which man has been submitting animal life for the past two centuries," a violent "war against the animal" which Derrida nevertheless hesitates to describe as *genocide* (even though "there are also animal genocides: the number of species endangered because of man takes one's breath away"), because much of the "torture" involves "the organization and exploitation of an artificial, infernal, virtually interminable survival." See Derrida, *The Animal that Therefore I am*, M.-L. Mallet, ed., D. Wills, trans. (New York: Fordham, 2008), pp. 26, 101, 117.