# Editor's Introduction

## The Early Levinas (1930–49) and the Escape from Being

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Let us suppose that Emmanuel Levinas had never written *Totality and Infinity* or indeed any of the books on ethics for which he is famous. Let us also imagine that he had never commented on the Talmud. It can still be assumed that he would be remembered today as someone who helped introduce phenomenology to a whole generation of postwar French thinkers, including Sartre.[1]

Levinas's early intellectual itinerary is well documented. Born into a bourgeois family of Jewish Russophiles living in Kovno, Lithuania, in 1906, Levinas found himself caught between two worlds: the eminent cultural center of Eastern European Jewry, which had already reached its spiritual zenith in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, and the new, Europeanized Russia modeled on Enlightenment values and culture. From the age of six Levinas learned to read the Bible in Hebrew, though he spoke only Russian at home. As a youth Levinas avidly devoured the works of the great Russian novelists (Pushkin, Lermontov, Gogol, Turgenev, Tolstoy, and Dostoyevsky) and the great writers of Western Europe, including Shakespeare, that lined the shelves of his father's bookstore. These would remain important influences on Levinas's thinking and provide him with his apprenticeship

in philosophy. At age 11, Levinas was one of four Jewish children admitted to the Russian *lycée* in Kharkov in Ukraine, where his family had moved during World War I, and where he experienced the upheaval of the Russian Revolution of 1917. Upon the family's return to Lithuania in 1920, Levinas attended the Hebrew *lycée* in Kovno, and continued reading Jewish texts but "no philosophy" (*IR* 28). In 1923, he left his native Lithuania for France to study philosophy at Strasbourg University, where he encountered four philosophy professors who in his mind united "all the virtues of the university" (29), namely, Charles Blondel, Henri Carteron, Maurice Halbwachs, and, most of all, Maurice Pradines. When Pradines, in his course on ethics and politics, offered the Dreyfus Affair as an example of the ethical having priority over the political, he made a strong impression upon the young Levinas. After obtaining his *licence* in philosophy, Levinas went to Freiburg University to pursue his doctoral studies under the great master of phenomenology, Husserl. He spent the summer 1928 and winter 1928–29 semesters at Freiburg completing his dissertation, which he published under the title *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology* (1930). It was this landmark book, written when Levinas was just 24 years old, that was to have such a formidable impact on French intellectual life after World War II.

It was also at Freiburg, in late 1928, that Levinas attended the lectures of Husserl's successor to the chair of philosophy, Heidegger, whose *Being and Time* had exploded on the philosophical scene only a year earlier. This early encounter with Heidegger would have a seminal and lasting impact on Levinas. In 1932 he published the first article on Heidegger to appear in French, "Martin Heidegger and Ontology," which was to have been part of a book on Heidegger, a project Levinas nevertheless abruptly abandoned when Heidegger joined the Nazi party on May 1, 1933. His consternation at Heidegger's involvement with the Nazis caused Levinas to see Heidegger's philosophy in a new light and redraw the customary boundary between a philosopher's life and his or her work. In two important essays appearing in the mid 1930s: "Some Thoughts on the Philosophy of Hitlerism" (1934) and "On

Escape" (1935), as Jean-Michel Salanskis points out in one of the essays included in this volume, even though Heidegger is not mentioned in by name, it is Heidegger's philosophy that is implicitly under critical scrutiny. This is perhaps more easily demonstrable in regard to "On Escape," whose central question is: How does one transcend or "escape" the experience of pure being, which is experienced as self-enchainment, world-weariness, malaise, nausea, shame, and horror? Several years later, in his first original book, *Existence and Existents* (1947), written during his long period of captivity during World War II, Levinas professed the need to break with Heideggerian philosophy as follows: "If at the beginning our reflections are in large measure inspired by the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, where we find the concept of ontology and of the relationship which man sustains with Being, they are also governed by the profound need to leave the climate of that philosophy" (*EE* 4).

The "profound need" to escape from the ontological monism of Heidegger would soon be generalized in terms of the need to leave behind the tradition of philosophy as a whole. Accordingly, in a lecture course delivered after the war at the *Collège Philosophique*, published under the title *Time and the Other* (1948), Levinas declared his intention to "break with Parmenides" (*TO* 42), the father of Western philosophy. One could say that Levinas's philosophical career from the 1950s onward was tirelessly dedicated to fulfilling that intention, despite the problems that leaving behind the tradition of ontology entailed, which included running up against the limits of language in an effort to say the *undefinable, unsayable, unthinkable* other of Being (Plato, *Sophist* 238e), who, for Levinas, is the other *human* being—the Other.

This fifth volume of *Levinas Studies* is dedicated to "the early Levinas" (1930–49). Joëlle Hansel's essay not only clarifies Levinas's relationship with Judaism prior to his undertaking a serious study of the Talmud after the war, but also shows how Levinas's later attempt to go beyond phenomenology was already anticipated, in germ at least, in his early writings on Judaism. Focusing much of her account on a revised transcript of an interview Levinas gave on a Jewish program of the French Radio on April 9, 1937, entitled "The Meaning of Religious Practice" (reprinted in this volume), Hansel tries to show how Levinas's phenomenology of concrete forms of Jewish ritual and liturgy reveals a domain in which resides the "mystery" that Levinas will later characterize as ethics.

Staying with the theme of phenomenology, James Dodd shows how Levinas's early studies of Husserl serve as the best point of departure for helping us to understand the significance of Levinas's relation to the phenomenological tradition and his subsequent transformation of it. Dodd's examination of five fundamental themes in Husserl's phenomenology (intentionality, self-evidence, sensation, egoic life, and the transcendental reduction) provides valuable insights into Levinas's mature thinking, not only in relation to Husserl, but also in connection with ethics. In retrospect, despite the fact that Levinas is frequently regarded as a "post-phenomenological thinker," it can be seen that Levinas represents a continuation and development of Husserl's thought rather than a clean break with it.

No one doubts the importance of Heidegger for Levinas, even if Levinas's thinking was ultimately to go in a quite different direction from Heidegger's. Jean-Michel Salanskis discusses Levinas's early reading of Heidegger, which he shows is already characterized by a deep reluctance to embrace the Heideggerian framework concerning Being. Salanskis also shows that Levinas's rejection of Heidegger amounts to a recovery not of traditional idealism as such, stemming from Plato, but of its underlying motivation, namely, the attempt to escape being and the facticity of the body. This renewed emphasis on the subject "outside of being," rather than the reverse, according to Salanskis, is

what provides Levinas with a way into his later thinking regarding the otherwise than being.

Alphonso Lingis's article shows how Levinas's early philosophy breaks with the relational ontology of Heidegger's *Being and Time* and with the theory of comprehension that justifies that ontology. While showing how *Existence and Existents* contains extraordinarily incisive insights into the phenomenal nature and type of existence of worldly realities, Lingis also notes that at this early stage we also find ontological interpretations that prefigure some of the questionable directions of Levinas's late work, in particular his seeming obliviousness to the other than human life.

The relationship between Levinas and Gabriel Marcel appeared to be one of mutual respect based on a shared distrust of scientific and objective knowledge as a basis for understanding interpersonal relations. Jeffrey Bloechl clearly shows several points of convergence between Levinas's and Marcel's thinking while also showing important areas of divergence. Both Levinas and Marcel reject the immanence implied by objective knowledge in the name of a transcendent relation with the absolutely other or what Marcel calls the *mystery*. However, whereas for Marcel transcendence is made possible by recovering a sense of "the sacrality of nature," for Levinas it implies the rejection of the sacred in the name of an ethics focused entirely on the face of the other human being who speaks to me from beyond the world and nature. Bloechl suggests that part of the tension between Marcel and Levinas may be attributable to different religious experiences—one Christian and the other post-Holocaust Jewish—raising the question of how far their respective philosophical viewpoints can ultimately be reconciled with each other.

In "God and Philosophy," appearing in 1975, Levinas startled all of his readers by informing them that what keeps them awake at night is the Other. The connection between the *there is* experienced as insomnia and transcendence as a relation with that which is ostensibly beyond being is discussed by Kris Sealey. Comparing the night of insomnia with what Levy-Bruhl called *participation* in the sacred, Sealey shows that

in the night of insomnia the subject is depersonalized to the extent of losing its autonomy, while at the same time retaining its foothold in being. Unlike in ecstatic or mystical experience before the sacred, the depersonalization effectuated by the *there is* precisely reinforces what makes the self unique. It is this "irrevocable tie to its *own* existence, or ground," as Sealey puts it, that essentially makes possible the self's relation with the transcendent Other qua responsibility and ethics.

It is no secret that Levinas's work was profoundly marked by the experience of being Jewish and witnessing persecution and war firsthand. Levinas described his life as dominated by "the presentiment and memory of the Nazi horror" (*DF* 290). Such inhumanity makes palpable our being delivered over to the forces of impersonal being, a tragic fate that leads to the very depths of despair. Can there still be hope when one has witnessed the crumbling of the world and the wretchedness of the human condition, when one has penetrated the vanity of existence so deeply that one has lost all reason to hope? Catherine Chalier's article examines what it might mean to hold up hope in the very midst of despair. Interrogating Levinas's comment in *Existence and Existents*: "There is hope only when hope is no longer permissible" (*EE* 93), Chalier outlines the development of the concept of "the keenness of hope," whose poignancy stems from the clear absence of reasons to hope that the present suffering is redeemable while holding onto the irrational hope in its redemption all the same. In despair at my life, and so at the accursed solitude that seems to determine it, I turn away toward the Other, whose existence gives me the intimation of a pardon, and thus holds out the promise of relieving me of the suffering of existence itself.

The last three essays address Levinas's early love of literature. It is well known that Levinas was led to philosophy by reading the great Russian novelists, in particular Dostoyevsky (*IR* 28). Val Vinokur points up some striking parallels between the situation of Dostoyevsky's famous narrator in *Notes from Underground* and that of human beings in general, who according to Levinas are walled in on themselves and find themselves unable to escape their own being. At the same time,

Vinokur presents the Russian figure of the devil as a representation of this need to escape, and also the biggest obstacle in the way of escaping. Vinokur suggests that the equivalent of this diabolic figure in Levinas's philosophy is self-preoccupation, which is the very definition of a lack of ethics.

Just as fascinating is Erik Larsen's exploration of the interpretive possibilities of Levinas's early philosophy for Franz Kafka's work. Larsen illustrates how Blanchot's readings of Kafka provide a productive link between Levinas's *il y a* and three stories by Kafka—*The Trial*, "The Burrow," and "In the Penal Colony." The possibility of reading Kafka's work in the context of Levinas's ethics is also briefly considered.

Finally, Nicholas Doenges provides a Levinasian study of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, in which he interprets and explicates those aspects of the play that Levinas in *Existence and Existents* and *Time and the Other* uses as literary attestation for his remarks on insomnia, shame, horror, death, and paternity. Surprisingly little has been written on Levinas and Shakespeare. Doenges's detailing of the reasons for why Macbeth is the "most Levinasian" of all dramas has done much to rectify the situation, and helps explain why Levinas should have remarked in *Time and the Other* that it seemed to him that the whole of Western philosophy is only a meditation of Shakespeare.

Clearly a volume devoted to the early Levinas will be useful not only for those readers who wish to see the vicissitudes of Levinas's thinking, but also for those who wish to get a better sense of the direction in which it was heading prior to and immediately after World War II. However, the project of constructing and assessing Levinas's "early writings," though a valuable exercise in itself, inevitably leaves unanswered the major question of what motivated Levinas from the fifties onward to follow the less trodden path of *ethics* as way of "getting

out of being" (*OE* 73). It is not the purpose of this volume to represent all the powerful intellectual, social, religious, and political forces that helped to shape and funnel Levinas's mature thought. Indeed, to pretend to do so would be ruinous, for it would exclude the most important force of all, the "weak force" that comes from the face of the Other, and which no ontology, sociology, religion, or politics can teach. As Levinas will say in *Totality and Infinity:* "When man truly approaches the Other he is uprooted from history" (*TI* 52). This volume will have served its purpose if it develops and enriches our understanding of Levinas's ethics, rather than presenting a final, definitive genealogical explanation for it.