

NICOLAS DE WARREN

Pennsylvania State University

DARKNESS OVER THE DEEP: LEVINAS AND THE EVIL OF
BEING

I am a stranger on the earth; do not hide your commandments from me.
Psalm 119

I. *Levinas and the Question of Evil*

The misery of the 20th century has indelibly rendered evil the least academic of problems in transforming its enigma into one of the more urgent questions for philosophical reflection in our times, and for some, for *all* time. As widely acknowledged, the phenomenon of evil poses a fundamental challenge for philosophy as well as theology. Significant is less the acknowledgment of this challenge *per se*, but the manner in which this challenge is accepted and met: "as either an invitation to think less or as a provocation to think more, that is to say, to think otherwise."¹ With Auschwitz, as Arendt soberly stated, "the impossible became true."² "Auschwitz" designates not only a specific historical event, but has since become emblematic of an experience of evil that time and again during the 20th-century has tested, and for many broken, the foundations of ethical thought in the Western tradition. As Arendt observes:

It is inherent in our entire philosophical tradition that we cannot conceive of 'radical evil,' and this is true both for Christian theology, which conceded to the Devil himself a celestial origin, as well as for Kant [...] we actually have nothing to fall back on in order to understand a phenomenon that nevertheless confronts us with its overpowering reality [...].³

Although Arendt employs the Kantian term "radical evil," what she *means* is precisely what Kant suspected without ever accepting: the possibility of *diabolic evil*. It is for Kant impossible to be a "devilish creature," the devil incarnate, a creature who wills evil into being gratuitously and so ushers into the world an absolute evil, or in Susan Neiman's words, "an absolute

¹ P. Ricoeur, *Le mal. Une défi à la philosophie et à la théologie* (Genève: Labor et Fides, 1986), 13.

² H. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism. New Edition with Added Prefaces* (San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace & Company 1973), 459.

³ *Ibid.*, 459.

wrongdoing that leaves no room for account or expiation."⁴ Whereas on Kant's conception, radical evil involves the reversal of the relationship between the moral law (categorical imperative) and self-interest, whereby I assert my own hypothetical maxim *above* the moral law, and hence claim an exception to the moral law, diabolic evil would entail a gratuitous motivation or, in other words, the absurd motivation, that could not even be claimed as my own in terms of my self-interest—banal in Arendt's famous suggestion or else profoundly other—darker and deeper than my own being.

Among those who responded philosophically to the challenge of evil and intellectually shouldered what Arendt called *die Last der Verantwortung* in the aftermath of Auschwitz—those who had eyes for this original manifestation of evil, few were those who already had eyes before; who already perceived and accepted the provocation to think otherwise of an evil beyond explanation and expiation *prior* to the manifestation of its full catastrophe. Of those who did⁵, none would become more haunted in their philosophical quest than Levinas, who arguably stands alone in his uncompromising and untiring transformation of philosophical thought into an ethical conscience for the ages.

As early as 1934, a year after Hitler's ascend to power and Heidegger's notorious *Rektoratsrede*, Levinas embarked on his way towards confronting the malignancy of evil in our times with a "magistral phenomenological" (in the apt characterization of Miguel Abensour⁶) analysis of the significance and historical uniqueness of Nazism. In "Quelques réflexions sur la philosophie de l'hitlérisme," Levinas confronts "hitlerism," or Nazism, in all of its "terrible danger" as philosophically "interesting," and proposes a conception of Nazism, not merely in psychological or social terms, nor even as an irrationalism, but in view of its "spiritual essence."⁷

⁴ S. Neiman, *Evil in modern thought: An alternative history of philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2002), 3.

⁵ Georges Bataille's "La structure psychologique du fascisme" (1933) (available at:

http://www.pilefacebis.com/sollers/IMG/pdf/hermes_1989_5-6_137.pdf), Aurel Kolnai's *The War Against the West* (1938) (New York: The Viking Press, 1988), Jacques Maritain, *Les Juifs parmi les nations* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1938) and Eric Voegelin's "Some Problems of German Hegemony" (1940) and *Hitler and the Germans* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999).

⁶ M. Abensour, "Le Mal elemental," in: Emmanuel Levinas, *Quelques réflexions sur la philosophie de l'hitlérisme* (Paris: Rivages poche, 1997).

⁷ Levinas' essay was originally published in the progressive Catholic journal *Esprit*. An English translation was published under the title "Reflections on the Philosophy of hitlerism," in *Critical Inquiry*, 17/1 (1990), 63-71. Levinas' only publication in Lithuanian, an article from 1933 "The Understanding of Spirituality in French and German Culture" as well as a series of articles for the journal of the Alliance Israélite Universelle, *Paix et Droit*, written between 1935 and 1939 represent Levinas' most explicit and urgent confrontation with National Socialism. For an overview of these writings, see J. Hansel,

As an ontological event announcing a new conception of human existence in a collapsed relation to the world, Nazism calls into question the fundamental principles of European civilization.⁸ As Levinas would fully recognize:

Perhaps the most revolutionary fact of our twentieth-century consciousness—but it is also an event in Sacred History—is that of the destruction of all balance between Western thought's explicit and implicit theodicy and the forms that suffering and its evil are taking on in the very unfolding of this century.⁹

Looking back in a *postscriptum* written for the 1990 English translation of his 1934 essay, Levinas observes:

The article stems from the conviction that the source of the bloody barbarism of National Socialism lies not in some contingent anomaly within human reasoning, nor in some accidental ideological misunderstanding. This article expresses the conviction that this source stems from the essential possibility of *elemental Evil* into which we can be led by logic and against which Western philosophy had not sufficiently insured itself. This possibility is inscribed within the ontology of a being concerned with being [*de l'être soucieux d'être*]—a being, to use the Heideggerian expression, '*dem es in seinem Sein um dieses Sein selbst geht*'.¹⁰

As Levinas stresses here once again, and never tired of confronting through-out his thinking, Nazism is not merely an aberrant ideology or an irrationalism without restraint; it represents a rupture within "sacred history" and the revelation of "elemental evil" against which the history of Western thought—"metaphysics"—proves helpless, without *insurance*: "*contre laquelle la philosophie occidentale ne s'était pas assez assurée*" (my emphasis). Yet, although this "essential possibility" and historical manifestation of "elemental evil" marked Levinas' thinking from its beginning, and its sense of responsibility as thinking to the end, as Richard Bernstein observes, "in the extensive secondary literature dealing with Levinas, evil is barely

⁸ "The Presentiment of the Shoah in Levinas' Early Writings," in: *A Century with Levinas. On the Ruins of Totality*, ed. R. Šerptytė (Vilnius: VUL, 2009), 125-133.

⁹ As Miguel Abensour has argued, Levinas' 1935 essay *De l'evasion* must also be read with the 1934 essay as the intertwining of two critiques: against Nazism and against Heidegger. See again M. Abensour, "Le Mal elemental."

¹⁰ Levinas, "Useless suffering," in *Entre nous. Thinking of the Other*, trans. M. B. Smith, and B. Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press 1998), 91-101, here 97.

¹⁰ E. Levinas, "Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism," 63.

mentioned."¹¹ This near silence is all the more striking given the elevation of Levinas' thinking in the past decades to the premier philosophy of Otherness. "Otherness," "alterity," "transcendence," "the beyond," and other associated signifiers have long become inscribed into the contemporary philosophical discourse and thoroughly absorbed into our intellectual sensibilities. As the inimitable Rudi Visker remarks, the "confidence in the theme of 'alterity' gets its most serious and vigorous articulation in the philosophy of Levinas."¹²

The word *confidence* is here astutely chosen as it smartly highlights the kind of *investment* in the theme of alterity as well the kind of *assurance* from the theme of alterity that underwrites the philosophical confidence in the theme of the Other. This confidence is in fact two-fold. On the one hand, the return of Religion is a return on an investment in the theme of the Other. On the other hand, the investment in the theme of the Other is assured through the return of Religion. This circuit of investment, return, and assurance between the Other and the Other of the Other structures this novel philosophical constellation: the turn to the Other is at the same time the re-turn of the "religious"—but if so, it is even more surprising to note the virtual absence of the question of evil from the *confidence* in the turn to the Other and the return of religion, not only in the reception of Levinas, but as manifest in the discourse of the Other and religion in contemporary thought. This discourse of the Other and of God, beyond being and otherwise than essence, for some even "weak" and "in-between," sustains itself as a discourse on the basis on an unspoken trust in the figure of Otherness. This trust underwrites the legibility and acceptance of these signifiers within philosophical discourse, and thus secures the possibility of their intelligibility in opening a space for their contested readings, interpretations, etc. And yet, in the paradigmatic instance of Levinas, this investment in the theme of the Other is leveraged against nothing less than an assurance against "elemental evil." There is no thinking of the Other and/or of God without directly speaking of and speaking to "elemental evil." As Levinas writes:

The philosophical problem, then, that is posed by the useless suffering that appears in its fundamental malignancy through the events of the 20th-century, concerns the meaning that religiosity, but also the human morality of goodness, can continue to have after the end of theodicy.¹³

¹¹ R. Bernstein, *Radical Evil. A Philosophical Interrogation* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), 167. See, however: *Cahiers d'Etudes Lévinassiennes: Le mal* (2008); C. Chalier, "Ontologie et mal," in: Emmanuel Lévinas. *L'éthique comme philosophie première* (Paris: Cerf, 1993), 63-78, and R. Visker's insightful discussion in *The Inhuman Condition* (New York et al.: Kluwer, 2004), 112-141.

¹² Rudi Visker, *The Inhuman Condition*, 190.

¹³ Levinas, "Useless Suffering," 99.

Does religion and ethics still have a meaningful future in the aftermath of the misery of the 20th-century?

That the problem of evil represents *what is at stake* with a thinking otherwise of the Other and "ethics as first philosophy" is nowhere more succinctly formulated than in Levinas' essay "Transcendence and Evil" in which the "excessive rupture" and "transcendence" of evil is an explicit focal point of reflection. Viewed from the investment in the return of religion and turn towards the Other *today*, thirty plus years after its publication, what is striking about this essay is that Levinas clearly identifies *two* different trajectories for "daring to take interest in the meaning of transcendence" after the death of God and in the wake of the ontological difference. A first direction is represented by what Levinas acknowledges as "the profound and subtle essay by Jean-Luc Marion on the divinity of God."¹⁴ While in 1978, *The Idol and the Distance* was indeed an "isolated" attempt among philosophers to understand God "no longer from being" and at a "distance from the ontological difference," since Marion's ground-breaking work, that enterprise (and Marion's own adventure with *God Without Being*¹⁵ and subsequent writings) has become densely populated, and now largely defines the field of "Continental" philosophy of religion. This is not to claim that Marion's thinking determines this field exclusively, but that the direction of thinking God and the Other at a "distance from the ontological difference" exemplified with Marion's thinking broadly reflects the basic orientation of the return of religion as a field of discourse. This orientation appears clearly in contrast with another direction of thinking which Levinas identifies with "another young thinker," Philippe Nemo and his then recently published *Job and the Excess of Evil*.¹⁶ As Levinas remarks, Nemo's work is "written with the same attention paid to transcendence, and starting with a certain modality of the psyche, a certain noteworthy lived experience, which interrupts the world [...]"¹⁷ Unlike Marion, the problem of divine transcendence responds directly to the situation of evil and Nemo's radical thesis of evil beyond being as the philosophical meaning of Job's lament. For both Marion and Nemo, according to Levinas, "the ontological difference seems [...] to have been the major encouragement" to thinking anew and critically vis-à-vis a metaphysical tradition which defined through ontology the meaning of transcendence.¹⁸ A critical difference nonetheless emerges between Marion and Nemo; for the latter the problem of evil provides the scandal and provocation *for which* the pursuit of divine transcendence and the inscription of an ethical difference between "the Good" and "evil" is the only and necessary response.

¹⁴ Ibid., 126.

¹⁵ J.-L. Marion, *God Without Being. Hors-Texte*, trans. T. A. Carlson (Chicago and London, Chicago University Press 1991).

¹⁶ P. Nemo, *Job and the Excess of Evil*, trans. M. Kigel (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998).

¹⁷ Levinas, "Transcendence and Evil," in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. A. Lingis (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff 1986), 178.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 178.

Hence the "exceptional significance" of Nemo's insight into evil as transcendence and excess, beyond being; it is an insight that Levinas recognizes as also close to his own.

Levinas suggests both tacitly and tactfully that there is something *more* "courageous" and "daring" with Nemo's approach to think anew an ethical difference between the Good and evil. Indeed, Levinas ascribes to this new possibility a comparable significance with the respective breakthroughs of Husserl and Heidegger:

The intuition that consists in catching sight, in the pure quality of a phenomenon such as evil, of the *how* of a break with immanence is a view that seems to us to be intellectually as rich as the rediscovery of intentionality appeared at the beginning of phenomenology, or the dazzling pages about *Zuhändigkeit* and *Stimmung* in *Being and Time*.¹⁹

Intentionality (Husserl), the ontological difference (Heidegger) and the transcendence of evil (Nemo) would thus mark the successive navigation points for the daring adventure of thinking anew the meaning of transcendence.

As reflected in Levinas' comparison in 1978, this parting of ways between Marion and Nemo offers a revealing perspective on the conspicuous *silence* with regard to the problem of evil within much of the contemporary fascination and investment with the Other and the return of religion today. It is as if the way of Marion proved more congenial than the way of Nemo (and by implication, the way of Levinas); as if the gravity of evil *for* an investment in the Other was quietly passed over in the hopes of deriving an assurance against the challenge of evil without ever having to truly speak of evil or speak to evil directly. To cite a symptomatic example: in Brian Treanor's *Aspects of Alterity*²⁰, an investigation, as the title makes plain, into the question of otherness that usefully compares Levinas and Marcel, but also includes discussions of Derrida, Marion, Caputo, etc., we find *no recognition or treatment* of the question of evil. The term "evil" appears in fact only *once, in passing*: in the context of presenting Marcel's distinction between problem and mystery. For the life of a thinking that dedicated itself to the *refusal to forget* the reality and possibility of "elemental evil," must we now acknowledge a "forgetting of evil" as the veritable ruse of the Other, which, in its contemporary orientation, has eclipsed the challenge for which the turn to the Other was first urgently and responsibly ordained? Has Levinas' thinking of the Other now passed in vain? As Levinas poignantly once remarked about his calling: "Ma vie se serait-elle passée entre l'hitlérisme incessamment pressenti et

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 180.

²⁰ B. Treanor, *Aspects of Alterity. Levinas, Marcel and the Contemporary Debate* (New York: Fordham University Press 2006).

l'hitlérisme se refusent à tout oubli?"²¹

II. *The Evil and Pain of Being*

Evil in the tradition of theodicy, understood as Levinas does in a both broad and narrow meaning, is said to lack any intrinsic intelligibility or being. Evil is understood negatively as the privation of the good (*privatio boni*) and being. We can only see evil in the light of what it offends. Any intelligibility granted to evil is a function of its inscription within an order of meaning within the horizon of being and an historical eschatology of significance in which evil is vanquished, accommodated, or overcome. Although the meaning of "privation," "evil," and "good" admit various conceptions within the history of Western thought, two frameworks can be taken as paradigmatic, if one conceives of theodicy broadly (and not merely in its narrow application with Leibniz): Augustine's refutation of Manicheanism and the creation of a theologically framed conception of evil as privation; Hegel's conception of evil as the work of a negativity absorbed and over-come in the history of Spirit. In each case, an essential feature of theodicy is the identification of evil with a non-independent "nothingness" *relative* to being (and/or the good).

When placed against the tradition of theodicy and its identification of evil with negativity, or nothingness in a privative sense, Levinas' conception of evil is daring for its fundamental reversal of the relation between evil and non-being. For if evil is historically thought in terms of a privative conception of nothingness, Levinas argues instead for the identification of being *with* evil, in contrast to which the Good in its Holiness is elevated to *nothingness*. "Why in our liturgy," Levinas remarks, "do we say *kadosh*, holy, three times? Because if the first *kadosh* is nothing, then there's the second, and if the second is nothing, there's still the third."²² Neither the Good nor the ethical significance of creation can be conceived in ontological terms. As Levinas writes:

Properly speaking the Good does not have *to be*, and is not, were it not out of goodness. Passivity is the being, from *beyond being*, of the Good which language is right to circumscribe—betraying it, to be sure, as always—by the word non-being.²³

This novel meaning of "non-being" in an original "transcendence" (or "excedance") and "excess" reverses an historically entrenched privative conception of transcendence.

²¹ F. Poirié, E. Lévinas, *Emmanuel Lévinas. Qui êtes-vous ?* (Lyon: La manufacture 1987), 90.

²² M. de Saint Cheron, *Conversations with Emmanuel Levinas, 1938-1994*, trans. G. Mole (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2010), 18.

²³ E. Levinas, "Humanism and Anarchy," in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 127-139, here 135.

Although Levinas conceives of evil as "transcendence" in his response to Phillip Nemo's interpretation of the Book of Job, in Levinas' earliest writings, and which shall interest me here in this essay exclusively, we witness the foundational act of Levinas' thinking with a conception of evil as the weight of immanence and the proper scandal of the facelessness of being itself. With this identification of evil with being as pit against the nothingness of the Good, evil takes on two principal forms: as the evil of being and as the evil of the self-enclosed solitude of consciousness, or the subject.²⁴ If the latter conception of evil finds resonance in the philosophical tradition with the recognition of egotism and self-love as the source of evil (although for Levinas these notions become *ontologically* re-conceived), the former (*le mal de l'être*) appears to have no *direct* equivalent in the philosophical tradition. As I shall argue here, what is philosophically original with Levinas' conception of evil as being in his early writings is the *structural entanglement* between the evil of being and the misery of my being ("subjectivity"). A consequence of this doubling of evil, it is my aim to show, consists in a more complex conception of evil as egoism that countenances what Kant and a philosophical tradition deemed impossible: *diabolic or elemental evil*.

This conjunction of evil and being provides the critical leverage for Levinas' complex struggle against and beyond Heidegger's thinking and its focal point on the question of being. The guiding intuition in Levinas' thinking can be understood as the attempt to displace the ontological difference with an ethical difference; central to this effort is his argument for the transcendence of the Good from the totality of being(s) and being as such. This elevation of the Good beyond being is inseparable from (and perhaps at the cost of) a debasement of being to the strangeness of an *immanent* otherness in two senses: as an otherness of being immanent to my own being and as an otherness immanent to being itself. As Levinas writes:

Being is essentially alien and strikes against us. We undergo its suffocating embrace like the night, but it does not respond to us. There is pain/evil in being. If philosophy is the questioning of being, it is already a taking on of being. And if it is more than this question, this is because it permits going beyond the question, and not because it answers it. What more there can be than the question of being is not some truth—but the good.²⁵

The dislocation of the primacy of the ontological difference in Levinas' argumentation begins with a provocative dislocation of being from any entanglement or implication with the ontological

²⁴ As already noted: evil as transcendence will not directly concern me in this essay. I shall throughout this essay speak interchangeably of consciousness and subjectivity, or the subject.

²⁵ E. Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. A. Lingis (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1978), 9.

difference between *Sein* and *Seiendes*, which Levinas recognizes as the most profound of Heideggerian distinctions and precisely because of the breakthrough made available through its contestation. Whereas for Heidegger the ontological difference must always be thought as and in its difference, Levinas proposes the possibility of thinking "un exister sans sujet, sans nous," or, in other words, being (*Sein*) as such without entanglement or complicity in its differentiation from beings (*un existant*).²⁶ Levinas concedes that Heidegger would consider the possibility of thinking "being" without "beings" "absurd." Precisely this absurdity of being Levinas seeks to think.

Where Heidegger thinks of an ontological distinction, or difference between being and beings, Levinas proposes a *separation* of being. This separation of being *from* beings does not in turn embrace a conception of being as "nothingness" *nor* as the liminal thought-object of the "thing in itself." The separation of being *from* beings, and hence of being *from* the ontological difference (and thus: the first moment in the displacement of the centrality or absoluteness of the ontological difference) occurs through a radical form of ontological reduction (not to be confused with a phenomenological or transcendental reduction). As Levinas writes, "*imaginons le retour au néant de toutes choses, être et personnes.*"²⁷ Through the reduction of beings to being, revealed is not nothingness (being absent of any differentiation in beings) but "that there just is" ("le fait qu'il y a"). Being is not an absolute subject (transcendental subjectivity), an absolute substance or a Kantian thing in itself. The *il y a* is the "*Irrémissibilité de l'exister*" without any possibility of escape or refusal. The *il y a*, or being separated from beings, is not the Sartrean *en soi* but the *sans soi*; it is the absurdity of being that is "*irremisable*," without distance or escape, lacking any fixity in being itself. One cannot properly speaking take an interest in the *il y a*. In its sheer "uninterestingness," being has not *retreated or withdrawn* from the scene of beings but on contrast remains immovable as an abyss. As Levinas remarks, the *il y a* exhibits an elective affinity with a classical philosophical metaphor: Heraclitus' river in which one does not even step in once—not, in other words, the river of all things changing in which one can only step once, but what we might call the abysmal depth of an immovable water without fixity and identity, entirely separated from beings. This separation of being *from* beings in the isolation of the *il y a* founds the evil of being: "*La notion de l'être irrémissible et sans issue, constitue l'absurdité foncière de l'être. L'être est le mal, non pas que fini, mais parce que sans limites.*"²⁸ It is "without issue," or "un-given," both taken for granted and gratuitous, but more importantly thereby accepted without contest and incontestably so.

²⁶ Levinas translates *Sein* and *Seiendes* into the French *exister* and *existant*.

²⁷ Levinas, *Le temps et l'autre*, (Paris: P.U.F., 1991), 25.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 29.

The abysmal foundation of being enjoys an unusually rich vocabulary in Levinas' thinking: being is massive and suffocating; being is darkness and night; being is unresponsive and mute. The reduction to the *il y a* exposes the plenitude of being in its brutality. The horror of the unmoving silence of being—the event of being: that there just is—is the stupor of an anonymous vigilance outside of time. As Levinas remarks, there is no generosity in the German "gibt" of the expression "es gibt." There just is the unbearable weight of being. The *il y a* is neither a timeless present nor a present without end, since on Levinas' account the temporal present only emerges with the hypostasis of consciousness. In a highly suggestive phenomenological example, the plenitude of being is manifest as the murmur of insomnia, an experience characterized as a breakthrough within consciousness of an anonymous vigilance without end, suspending consciousness from within. Insomnia sets consciousness beside itself, and renders it entirely suspended beyond sleep and wakefulness; it becomes transfixed by an anonymous vigilance with neither beginning nor end, and hence, without any means or path of escape *from within*. It is thus not identical with nightly boredom, nostalgia, or even not being able to sleep; the manifestation of the *il y a* in insomnia is not the anxiety before nothingness or my death. The plenitude of the *il y a* embraces us in its massiveness; it is mute and unresponsive to the plight of our own being for ourselves. The Horror is not the emptiness of being but its full-on plenitude.

This threefold characterization of the *il y a* as silence, darkness, and plenitude represents a philosophical inscription of the "welter and waste" (or "emptiness and void") of the *tohu wabohu* of Genesis: *the earth then was welter and waste and darkness over the deep*.

In the *il y a*, Levinas brilliantly re-configures a Biblical image (*the deep* of Genesis) with a Classical Philosophical metaphor (*the flux* of Heraclitus). In Levinas' Genesis, however, the first moment of creation is *self-creation*, or the hypothesis of consciousness as a rupture within the undifferentiated plenitude of the *il y a*. The *il y a* is strictly speaking not only "uncreated" but *unreceptive* towards creation; it stands there in its sheer indifference to creation as well as to the living and the dead. This hypostasis of consciousness (for which we cannot say "why" it occurs) within the heart of being's darkness is the creation of *light and reason*. The hypostasis of consciousness is importantly the deployment of a mastery over being through the establishment of a principle of sovereignty over the being that the subject is for itself. Levinas thus speaks of the hypostasis of consciousness as the "contraction" of being (*exister*) by which a being (*un existant*) posits itself or situates itself in relation to its existence (*son exister*), thus making it—itself—its own. This contraction of being institutes the ontological difference *in* the self-constitution of that being for whom being as such is at issue with its own being.

The hypostasis of consciousness is, however, the ruse of a false escape from the horror of being: consciousness takes flight from being at the price of attaching itself to its own being. If an "attachment without possibility of escape" or "irremissibility of being" characterized the abysmal evil of being, in the hypostasis of consciousness, although, in one sense, consciousness takes distance from being in relating to itself as being, in another sense, the figure of enchainment or attachment to being is re-constituted as the proper name and ontological condition of subjectivity itself. The hypostasis of consciousness within being constitutes the solitude of a mastery over oneself such that I am for myself *uncreated*, not created by another, but posited in and for myself. The fundamental consequence of this rupture within the *mal de l'être* is the self-identification and self-enchainment of the subject with itself: "il est monade et solitude."²⁹ This solitude of my own being, or *Jemeinigkeit*, expresses itself as *virility, pride, and sovereignty*, which Levinas understands neither as psychological or social determinations, but as the mode of being that subjectivity just is. The act of self-creation is in truth a *false creation*, or the idol of creation, that brings onto the stage a second form of evil as the *misery of subjectivity for itself*.

The mastery over oneself that protects oneself from the horror of the *il y a* is at the same time an imprisonment within oneself. In retreating from the evil of being (*le mal de l'être*) I am thrown into the misery of (my own) being: *le malheur d'être*. If consciousness constitutes itself as a subject for itself in the principal form of its own self-identity, this entails a distance or interval from *being as such* that becomes inscribed within its own being as an interval between *soi* and *moi*. What is most immanent to me is this, my self-relation. Stated less abstractly, what is most immanent to my being is that my being is irremediably at issue and at stake in my being. This essential *ipseity* of the subject is conceived by Levinas ontologically as a fundamental form of self-enchainment: I cannot detach myself from myself. Consciousness is irremediably "riveted to itself" (*rivé à soi*): to be is for me to be riveted to my own being (*être rivée*). Such "self-enchainment" materializes the subject, or consciousness, in its misery: "La matière est le malheur de l'hypostase. Solitude et matérialité vont ensemble."³⁰

The hypostasis of consciousness is upon closer reflection more intriguing than at first apparent. Subjectivity is doubled with itself in being irremediably riveted to itself. This "doublement" of subjectivity constitutes its veritable materiality: I am condemned to carry my existence and be carried away with my existence as a burden that accompanies me like a "stupid, burdensome" double. The stupidity within me that is my burden – *my being* – is this self-attachment that I accept without question and, as it were, in a fully acquiescing stupor. What I accept first of all is the attachment to myself and for no reason other than *to be* myself. The materiality

²⁹ Ibid., 32.

³⁰ Ibid., 39.

of subjectivity as this doubling within itself can furthermore be characterized as the doubling of my being into a *having* of my being. The interval and distinction between *soi* and *moi* is the interval and distinction between being my body and having my body. This latter distinction represents a conception of the embodiment of consciousness in ontological terms: to be embodied is to be a body that I relate to as something that I have. This doubling of subjectivity that just is the misery of its materiality and solitude is, however, ontologically *doubly* ambiguous. The first ambiguity is inscribed in my relation to the world as structured by the antinomy of Jacob and Esau, that is, between the need for salvation and the need for satisfaction. The second ambiguity is inscribed in my embodiment as vulnerable to the neutralization of the difference between "being" and "having" in which my subjectivity is incarnated. Consciousness is enmeshed to itself in its ontological manner of being as "concern for itself." As noted, consciousness is an opening, or relation, towards itself as well as an imprisonment within itself. By virtue of *having* my being, or existence, I am thrown into caring for my existence and thus directed towards the world for sustenance. The interval between *soi* and *moi*, or "being" and "having," opens a breach within consciousness from which the subject seeks to overcome or relieve itself of its own materiality, or burden, or misery, of existence. Levinas here takes issue with Heidegger's construal of "being-in-the-world" in an important regard; the life-world is not primarily manifest as a system of tools or instruments (the world of work). As Levinas argues, it is fundamentally a constellation of nourishments (*un ensemble de nourritures*). This basic relation to the world as a world of earthly nourishment is determined essentially in terms of pleasure, or *jouissance*. In being directed towards the world, engaged and preoccupied with it, subjectivity takes leave of itself in becoming absorbed in the world brought to its attention. But since this pleasure taken in the world circles around the issue of my own materiality, as an attempt to surmount the burden of my existence, the world in turn becomes re-absorbed, or brought back, to my subjectivity. The basic movement of consciousness as "being-in-the-world" is erotic and centripetal: in starting from myself and reaching out into the world, I always return to myself. The otherness of being *becomes* a world for the nourishment of subjectivity in the false promise of providing salvation from the misery of my being and the horror of the *il y a*. The fundamental attunement of my being-in-the-world is the search for salvation from my own misery in being *through satisfactions and nourishments of the world*.³¹ From this basic movement of feeding from the world and the irremissible attachment of the *moi* to the *soi* as an attachment to the world, caught within the perpetually foiled movement of escape from the

³¹ There is a deep Hegelian resonance in Levinas' thinking: as with the dynamic of Hegel's Spirit, consciousness for Levinas is a dual-movement of self-identification (returning to oneself) through assimilation of "being" and its otherness—the horror of the *il y a* that becomes contracted and absorbed through the light and reason of subjectivity in its solitude.

misery of its own being, Levinas quickly derives the basic structure of knowledge and light: reason is the consumption and illumination of an exteriority brought back to the immanence of subjectivity.

The profound *malheur* of solitude is essentially an erotic hunger for an escape or evasion from its own materiality that falsely pursues the promise of satisfactions in the world. The virility of consciousness and the centripetal movement of its *conatus essendi* is not, however, an erotic movement that is negatively determined as either the over-coming of "finitude" or as the striving to fulfill a fundamental lack within. On the contrary, and in keeping with Levinas' fundamental identification of evil with the plenitude of being, the erotic hunger, or need, of the materiality of subjectivity is the *malaise* of its being: the full-on suffering of its own existence. This suffering of our own existence, the unbearable weight of my being, is the existential source of need as the need for a satisfaction that would relieve me of the misery that I am for myself, but which, as satisfaction taken in the world, perpetually eludes me. Levinas offers a suggestive expression for this malaise of our being when he speaks of the "demand" or "claim" ("une exigence") made on me by my being as "une espèce de poids mort au fond de notre être, dont la satisfaction n'arrive pas à nous débarrasser."³² The demand *to be* made on me is not a demand that issues from me, that I make on myself. Instead, *it is* the stupid demand of my being just as the *il y a* is the indifference of the event of being that is immovable. There is comparable immovable exigency of being within my subjectivity that speaks to me, as it were, as an incessant, blind, and *inarticulate* demand to be. This insistence of being, that I am, anchors my self-attachment, self-preservation, and the projects of my freedom in the world.

At the foundation of the life of my subjectivity there lies in waiting the deadweight of an absurd insistence in being. There resides in me something dead; it is not a death awaiting *me* as the terminal horizon of my projects of being but a weight deep within that marks another death, not as the death of what is living, my life, but as *something inert around which I constitute my life*. What defines the meaninglessness of my death is not that death takes away my existence, or being, from me but that even my death cannot dislodge, render animate and meaningful, the deadweight within me. My death defies meaning *for me* because no amount of living can relieve me from the deadweight within. My freedom is haunted by this inertness of the being I attempt to carry in freedom. The malaise of my being is not that I die but that no amount of living to the full, as it were, will ever relieve me of the deadweight that insists within in me *to be*. This deadness within me (the deadness of a thing, not the death of the living) is the brutal indifference of (the) *being* that I must suffer in being-me. Nothing in my worldly pursuits and nothing within my will to power can release me from the plenitude of this deadweight

³² Levinas, *De l'évasion* (Paris: Fata Morgana 1982), 106; in the English translation: "[T]hesis according to which being is, at bottom, a weight for itself" (*On Escape*, 65).

within me. Transcendence in a genuine sense would relieve me of this deadweight—the centripetal center of my materiality and the malaise of my existence—not as a response to a lack but as a *lightness and elevation* from the misery of being: the full-on suffering of my being. Salvation is salvation from *the evil of being* and the misery of my materiality or subjectivity promised through a movement of "excendence" that would rupture this enchainment to myself. This possibility of genuine transcendence and alleviation occurs through an absolute responsibility for the death of the Other.

There is a second ambiguity and tension within the doubling of consciousness in its hypostasis from the anonymity of being (*exister*). This ambiguity is inscribed within the embodiment of subjectivity as constituted around the distinction between being my body and the having of my body. As already noted, need for Levinas is understood neither in terms of privation or insufficiency. The ontological foundation of need is the plenitude of our being, our total being, that weights on us as deadweight. This deadweight within me marks the fundamental sense in which I am attached to myself and am incapable *on my own* of breaking with myself. It is on account of the stupor of being within me that I am attached to myself for no reason other than just being. At the heart of my pride, virility, and self-affirmation (sovereignty) there resides something dead; indeed, we might surmise that for Levinas every insistence on self-affirmation, or sovereignty, held up as "vital to self-interest" or "absolutely necessary for the living" is based on something (already and always) dead within that the affirmation of freedom paradoxically seeks to relieve in becoming more and more its dumbfounded slave. There is a critical implication from this deadweight for the egotism and egoism of the subjectivity: the solitude of subjectivity crystallizes around the deadweight of its being, or what might be termed the dumbness or stupidity of no interest in particular, something to which I am attached without reason, but cannot say why. The deadweight within me that I am is neither something for which I myself can take responsibility nor which I can refute about myself. The heart of my pride, virility, and sovereignty, in other words, is something inhuman within me; it is not, however, a value or principle, but the plenitude of my being (*exister*), shorn of any determinations, values, or meaning for me. I can at most stupidly circle around the intrigue of my being without ever finding anything genuinely *interesting*.

This inhuman abyss within being-me becomes manifest in all of its disgust and horror in experiences of disintegration of embodiment. Two phenomena in particular are crucial in this respect: shame and nausea. Contrary to Sartre's influential analysis of shame in *Being and Nothingness*, shame is not structured through the gaze of the Other but reveals instead the "being of our being" and the impossibility of escaping from our own being. Shame is exhibited for Levinas in nudity: to stand ashamed of my nudity is not to stand in the revelation of

nothingness, but to face the full plenitude of my being in its brutality. The shame we experience before our own nudity returns us time and again to the impossibility of hiding from oneself our own being. We seek to hide from ourselves as well as to hide ourselves from others, yet we cannot flee from ourselves, that is, from the nakedness of our being. Nausea is more complex for Levinas: as with shame, nausea is the revelation of the impossibility of escape from our own being and the revelation that we are irremediably riveted to ourselves and enclosed in such a tight circle that we are suffocated by our own being. Nausea would thus share this intimate sense of suffocation without distance in insomnia. Nausea is the phenomenological manifestation of the "deadweight" within much as insomnia is the phenomenological index for the *il y a*. Levinas thus speaks of nausea as *mal au cœur*—the feeling of a deadweight in our heart (or malaise in our heart).

In nausea, the revelation of our own brute existence takes the form of a "revolting presence of ourselves for ourselves." Significantly, with this experience of *disgust at our own existence*, we experience an acute sense of being riveted to ourselves as well as an acute sense of revolt against our misery, and a stirring for escape from ourselves. Revulsion turns in two directions: revulsion *at* and revulsion *from*. As Levinas writes: this "experience of pure being [*in nausea*] is at the same time the experience of its internal antagonism and the evasion that it imposes."³³ Nausea is a "fundamental event of our being" as the stirring for escape or transcendence from our self-attachment as well as our attachment to the world in *jouissance*. This counter-movement to the chronic, chronological, and centripetal movement of self-enchainment takes the form of a transcendence that would rupture with the plenitude of *il y a*. This transcendence would provide both a *counter-weight* to and elevation from the deadweight deep within that -- even after the parting of darkness with the separation of the hypostasis of consciousness and the dawning of light -- nonetheless remains immovable within me as the scandal of my existence that can only be saved or redeemed, thus releasing me from evil of being, through a call and commandment that speaks to me from elsewhere than either the dark within me or the light of world outside me.

III. *The Inhuman Within*

Although Levinas speaks of the misery of subjectivity in terms of pride, virility, and sovereignty, all of which are subsumed under the broad heading of the egoism or evil of subjectivity, subjectivity is anchored in deadweight borne within. The egotism and egoism of the subjectivity (second form of evil) is, as I have argued, doubled from within by the evil of being as the inhuman abyss of subjectivity. This entanglement of the evil of being and the misery

³³ Levinas, *On Escape*, 22.

of subjectivity, the ambiguous doubling of the evil of being, is crisply profiled through a suggestive illustration of shame provided by Levinas in *On Escape*. As noted above, the impasse of shame consists in the thwarted movement of fleeing from oneself in the impossibility of hiding oneself from oneself and thus breaking with being riveted to one's being. The subject is essentially always present to itself, but this immanent self-presence is not manufactured in terms of Sartre's pre-reflective self-awareness, but as a presence to a *sans soi* or, in other words, the "it is" of my being to which I am enchainèd, which, in the instance of shame before my own nudity, becomes fully revealed to me in the uncanny intimacy of my nakedness. I feel my body as *having* me instead of me having my body. The nudity of the body is not the body revealed as *mere* materiality as opposed to the experience of my body as "lived." Nor is the shame of nakedness an index for the baseness of the body as opposed to the dignity of spirit.

In the context of this discussion of shame, Levinas offers a suggestive illustration for the scandal of existence that draws the ambiguity of the body along a line of broader implications towards what I have identified as the inhuman deadweight within my being. As Levinas observes: "The whistle that Charlie Chaplin swallows in *City Lights* triggers the scandal of the brutal presence of his being; it works like a recording device, which betrays the discrete manifestations of a presence that Charlie's legendary tramp costume barely dissimulates."³⁴ We should first dismiss any reading of this example in a Bergsonian light: the point for Levinas is not that the lived or animate-body has been reduced or contaminated, seized up, by mechanism, or the mechanical, in the swallowing of the whistle. In fact, Levinas' analysis of shame (and his conception of the body as an ontological event) is meant to disabuse us of any consideration of the body in light of a dualism between matter and *élan*. In the context of Levinas' discussion of shame, the swallowed whistle renders manifest the nakedness of being; this nudity, significantly, is not *seen* (the Tramp is not physically naked), but *sounded* in a ventriloquism of existence. The shame of nudity does not reside the display of a naked body *per se*. As Levinas remarks, the dance-hall girl as well as the boxer are (partially) naked, but in each case, nakedness provides the *cover* or screen for the veritable scandal of being. In each case, nakedness is carried by subjectivity as an exterior relation to itself.

What is suggestive with the example of Chaplin is that the swallowed whistle gives voice to the meaningless deadweight within: the squeaks and whistles are meaningless, discrete noises emanating from within, thus displacing the voice (and in Chaplin's silent film: this is the punch-line of a joke that is *heard*). An elective affinity can be discerned between this example of Chaplin's swallowed whistle and what I have earlier called the

³⁴ Ibid., 65.

murmur of being in insomnia. In both instances, the brutality of being is manifest through indiscernible sounds uttered through me, yet not properly *spoken* by me. If we recall the insistence or demand (*l'exigence*) of the deadweight within, my dumb attachment to my-being, it is as if the deadweight of being inarticulately speaks to me as an unintelligible demand to be. This voice-over of being not only dislodges the self-presence of my subjectivity as speaking and hearing itself. More critically, and this is what I find obliquely suggested in Levinas' example, the swallowed whistle *records* or "sounds" the abysmal depth of the misery of my being. Issued from nowhere, this sounding comes not from above me but from below. Left uninsured and invested by the trauma of the Good, we are prone to drown to deafness for the commandment "Thou Shall Not Kill" in the drone of an inarticulate insistence of this archaic deep within.