

Emmanuel Levinas has been Professor of Philosophy at the Sorbonne and the director of the Ecole Normale Israélite Orientale. Through such works as *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*, he has exerted a profound influence on twentieth-century continental philosophy, providing inspiration for Derrida, Lyotard, Blanchot and Irigaray.



The Levinas Reader collects, often for the first time in English, essays by Levinas encompassing every aspect of his thought: the early phenomenological studies written under the guidance and inspiration of Husserl and Heidegger; the fully developed ethical critique of such totalizing philosophies; the pioneering texts on the moral dimension to aesthetics; the rich and subtle readings of the Talmud which are an exemplary model of an ethical, transcendental philosophy at work; the admirable meditations on current political issues.

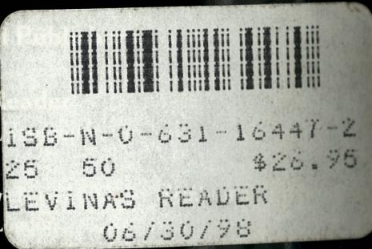
Seán Hand's introduction gives a complete overview of Levinas's work and situates each chapter within his general contribution to phenomenology, aesthetics, religion, politics and above all ethics. Each essay has been prefaced with a brief introduction presenting the basic issues and the necessary background, and suggesting ways to study the text further.

Seán Hand is Reader in French Culture at London Guildhall University. He is the author of studies on contemporary French literature and thought (Leiris, Jabès, Lacan) and has translated into English the work of Levinas, Deleuze, Kristeva and Irigaray.

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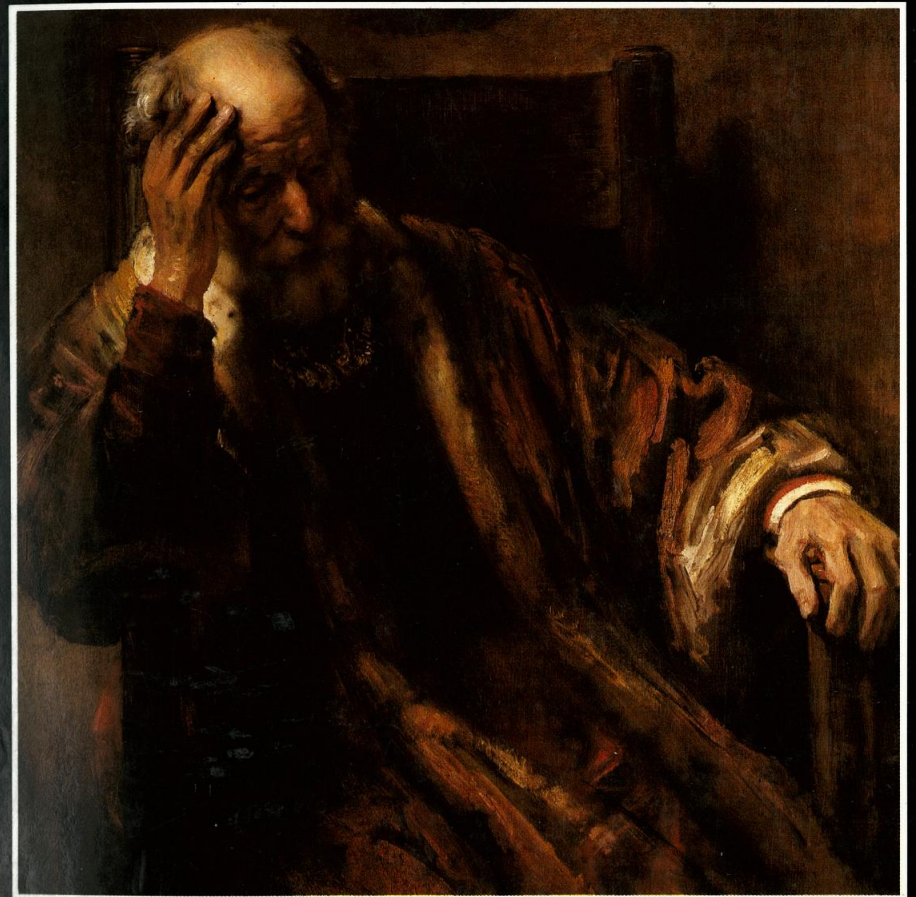


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Emmanuel Levinas

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Preface

Emmanuel Levinas is one of the most profound, exacting and original philosophers of twentieth-century Europe. His post-rational ethics stands as the ultimate and exemplary challenge to the solitude of Being, a rigorous and moving testimony of one's infinite obligation to the other person. Levinas's teaching reveals ethics to be the first philosophy: his call to responsibility henceforth obliges thought to refer not to the *true* but to the *good*. In assuming this colossal responsibility, Levinas has changed the course of contemporary philosophy.

The Levinas Reader is the most comprehensive introduction to Levinas's work yet published in English. The essays chosen encompass every aspect of his thought: the early phenomenological studies written under the guidance and inspiration of Husserl and Heidegger; the fully developed ethical critique of such totalizing philosophies; the pioneering essays on the moral dimension to aesthetics; the rich and subtle readings of the Talmud which are an exemplary model of an ethical, transcendental philosophy at work; the admirable meditations on current political issues. Given the extraordinary range of these texts, their specialized vocabulary and assumed knowledge, each essay has been prefaced by a brief introduction presenting the basic issues and the necessary background, and suggesting ways to study the text further. The general introduction to the edition presents a clear résumé of the circumstances surrounding Levinas's thought and each stage of its development, in the hope that the beginner as well as the specialist will be able to benefit from Levinas's inspiring teaching. A full bibliography has also been provided.

The Levinas Reader has both used the best of several extant English-language versions of his work, and commissioned translations especially for this volume. Given the very nature of Levinas's thought, involving an infinite responsibility for the other and an equally infinite interpretability of those texts which are the bedrock of our culture, the attempt to homogenize these translations to an excessive degree would directly contravene the very spirit of his philosophy. The notion of a true translation is precisely the

itself concealed a dimension in which a retreat to the hither side of immediate coincidence were possible, concealed a materiality more material than all matter – a materiality such that irritability, susceptibility or exposedness to wounds and outrage characterizes its passivity, more passive still than the passivity of effects. Maternity in the complete being 'for the other' which characterizes it, which is the very signifyingness of signification, is the ultimate sense of this vulnerability. This hither side of identity is not reducible to the for-itself, where, beyond its immediate identity, being recognizes itself in its difference. We have to formulate what the irremissibility and, in the etymological sense of the term, the anguish of this in-itself of the oneself are. This anguish is not the existential 'being-for-death', but the constriction of an 'entry inwards', or the 'hither side' of all extension. It is not a flight into the void, but a movement into fullness, the anguish of contraction and breakup.⁹ This describes the relation in which a subject is immolated without fleeing itself, without entering into ecstasy, without taking a distance from itself, in which it is pursued into itself, to the hither side of rest in itself, of its coincidence with itself. This recurrence, which one can, to be sure, call negativity (but a negativity antecedent to discourse, the unexceptionable homeland of dialectical negativity), this recurrence by contraction, is the self.

It is the negativity characteristic of the *in itself* without the openness of nothingness, penetrating into the plenum – *in itself* in the sense of *an sich* and *in sich*. It lies behind the distinction between rest and movement, between the being at home with oneself (*chez soi*) and wandering, between equality and difference. This negativity reminds us of the formulas of the *Parmenides* concerning the moment in which the One 'being in motion . . . [it] comes to a stand, or being at rest, (. . .) changes to being in motion,' and in which it 'must not be at any time' (156c). 'This strange sort of nature' which 'is situated between motion and rest' (156d)¹⁰ is not a cross-section of time at a point that preserves dynamically, in potency, the contradiction between the present and the future or the past. Nor is it an extra-temporal ideality which dominates temporal dispersion, for both points and idealities in their own way presuppose the ontological adventure. This 'strange sort of nature' is something on the hither side, without any reference to thematization, without even references to references rising in it, like 'itch', without any dialectical germination, quite sterile and pure, completely cut off from adventure and reminiscence. No grounds (*non-lieu*), meanwhile or contra-tempo time (or bad times (*malheur*)), it is on the hither side of being and of the nothingness which is thematizable like being.

The expression 'in one's skin' is not a metaphor for the in-itself; it refers to a recurrence in the dead time or the *meanwhile* which separates inspiration and expiration, the diastole and systole of the heart beating dully

against the walls of one's skin. The body is not only an image or figure here; it is the distinctive in-oneseff of the contraction of ipseity and its breakup.¹¹ This contraction is not an impossibility to forget oneself, to detach oneself from oneself, in the concern for oneself. It is a recurrence to oneself out of an irrecusable exigency of the other, a duty overflowing my being, a duty becoming a debt and an extreme passivity prior to the tranquillity, still quite relative, in the inertia and materiality of things at rest. It is a restlessness and patience that support prior to action and passion. Here what is due goes beyond having, but makes giving possible. This recurrence is incarnation. In it the body which makes giving possible makes one *other* without alienating. For this other is the heart, and the goodness, of the same, the inspiration or the very psyche in the soul.

The recurrence of ipseity, the incarnation, far from thickening and tumefying the soul, oppresses it and contracts it and exposes it naked to the other to the point of making the subject expose its very exposedness, which might cloak it, to the point of making it an uncovering of self in saying. The concept of the incarnate subject is not a biological concept. The schema that corporeality outlines submits the biological itself to a higher structure; it is dispossession, but not nothingness, for it is a negativity caught up in the impossibility of evading, without any field of initiative. It is, improbably enough, a retreat into the fullness of the punctual, into the inextendedness of the one. Responsibility prior to any free commitment, the oneself outside of all the tropes of essence, would be responsibility for the freedom of the others. The irremissible guilt with regard to the neighbour is like a Nessus tunic my skin would be.

The Self

Returning now to the theme of the first part of this exposition, we have to ask if this folding back upon oneself proper to ipseity (which does not even have the virtue of being an act of folding itself, but makes the act of consciousness turning back upon itself possible), this passive folding back, does not coincide with the anarchic passivity of an obsession. Is not obsession a relationship with the outside which is prior to the act that would open up this exterior? The total passivity of obsession is more passive still than the passivity of things, for in their 'prime matter' things sustain the kerygmatic logos that brings out their outlines in matter. In falling under this saying that ordains, matter takes on meaning, and shows itself to be this or that – a thing. This fall – or, this case – a pure surrender to the logos, without regard for the propositions that will make of the thing a narrative to which the logos belongs, is the essence of the accusative. The logos that informs prime matter in calling it to order is an accusation, or

a category. But obsession is anarchical; it accuses me beneath the level of prime matter. For as a category takes hold of matter, it takes as its model still what resistance, impenetrability, or potency remains in that matter, that 'being in potency'. Prime matter, presented as a being in potency, is still potency, which the form takes into account. It is not by chance that Plato teaches us that matter is eternal, and that for Aristotle matter is a *cause*; such is the truth for the order of *things*. Western philosophy, which perhaps is reification itself, remains faithful to the order of things and does not know the absolute passivity, beneath the level of activity and passivity, which is contributed by the idea of creation.¹² Philosophers have always wished to think of creation in ontological terms, that is, in function of a preexisting and indestructible matter.

In obsession the accusation effected by categories turns into an absolute accusative in which the ego proper to free consciousness is caught up. It is an accusation without foundation, to be sure, prior to any movement of the will, an obsessional and persecuting accusation. It strips the ego of its pride and the dominating imperialism characteristic of it. The subject is in the accusative, without recourse in being, expelled from being, outside of being, like the one in the first hypotheses of *Parmenides*, without a foundation, reduced to itself, and thus without condition. In its own skin. Not at rest under a form, but tight in its skin, encumbered and as it were stuffed with itself, suffocating under itself, insufficiently open, forced to detach itself from itself, to breathe more deeply, all the way, forced to dispossess itself to the point of losing itself. Does this loss have as its term the void, the zero point and the peace of cemeteries, as though the subjectivity of a subject meant nothing? Or do the being encumbered with oneself and the suffering of constriction in one's skin, better than metaphors, follow the exact trope of an alteration of essence, which inverts, or would invert, into a recurrence in which the expulsion of self outside of itself is its substitution for the other? Is not that what the self emptying itself of itself would really mean? This recurrence would be the ultimate secret of the incarnation of the subject; prior to all reflection, prior to every positing, an indebtedness before any loan, not assumed, anarchical, subjectivity of a bottomless passivity, made out of assignation, like the echo of a sound that would precede the resonance of this sound. The active source of this passivity is not thematizable. It is the passivity of a trauma, but one that prevents its own representation, a deafening trauma, cutting the thread of consciousness which should have welcomed it in its present, the passivity of being persecuted. This passivity deserves the epithet of complete or absolute only if the persecuted one is liable to answer for the persecutor. The face of the neighbour in its persecuting hatred can by this very malice obsess as something pitiful. This equivocation or enigma only the persecu-

ted one who does not evade it, but is without any references, any recourse or help (that is its uniqueness or its identity as unique!) is able to endure. To undergo from the other is an absolute patience only if by this from-the-other is already for-the-other. This transfer, other than interested, 'otherwise than essence', is subjectivity itself. 'To give his cheek to the smiter and to be filled with insults',¹³ to demand suffering in the suffering undergone (without producing the act that would be the exposing of the other cheek) is not to draw from suffering some kind of magical redemptive virtue. In the trauma of persecution it is to pass from the outrage undergone to the responsibility for the persecutor, and, in this sense from suffering to expiation for the other. Persecution is not something added to the subjectivity of the subject and his vulnerability; it is the very movement of recurrence. The subjectivity as *the other in the same*, as an inspiration, is the putting into question of all affirmation for-oneself, all egoism born again in this very recurrence. (This putting into question is not a preventing!) The subjectivity of a subject is responsibility of being-in-question¹⁴ in the form of the total exposure to offence in the cheek offered to the smiter. This responsibility is prior to dialogue, to the exchange of questions and answers, to the thematization of the said, which is superposed on my being put into question by the other in proximity, and in the saying proper to responsibility is produced as a digression.

The recurrence of persecution in the oneself is thus irreducible to intentionality in which, even in its neutrality as a contemplative movement, the will is affirmed. In it the fabric of the same, self-possession in a present, is never broken. When affected the ego is in the end affected only by itself, freely. Subjectivity taken as intentionality is founded on auto-affection as an auto-revelation, source of an impersonal discourse. The recurrence of the self in responsibility for others, a persecuting obsession, goes against intentionality, such that responsibility for others could never mean altruistic will, instinct of 'natural benevolence', or love. It is in the passivity of obsession, or incarnated passivity, that an identity individuates itself as unique, without recourse to any system of references, in the impossibility of evading the assignation of the other without blame. The re-presentation of self grasps it already in its trace. The absolution of the one is neither an evasion,¹⁵ nor an abstraction; it is a concreteness more concrete than the simply coherent in a totality. For under accusation by everyone, the responsibility for everyone goes to the point of substitution. A subject is a hostage.

Obsessed with responsibilities which did not arise in decisions taken by a subject 'contemplating freely', consequently accused in its innocence, subjectivity in itself is being thrown back on oneself. This means concretely: accused of what the others do or suffer, or responsible for what they do or suffer. The uniqueness of the self is the very fact of bearing the fault of

another. In responsibility for another subjectivity is only this unlimited passivity of an accusative which does not issue out of a declension it would have undergone starting with the nominative. This accusation can be reduced to the passivity of the self only as a persecution, but a persecution that turns into an expiation. Without persecution the ego raises its head and covers over the self. Everything is from the start in the accusative. Such is the exceptional condition or unconditionality of the self, the signification of the pronoun *self* for which our Latin grammars themselves know no nominative form.

The more I return to myself, the more I divest myself, under the traumatic effect of persecution, of my freedom as a constituted, wilful, imperialist subject, the more I discover myself to be responsible; the more just I am, the more guilty I am. I am 'in myself' through the others. The psyche is the other in the same, without alienating the same.¹⁶ Backed up against itself, in itself because without any recourse in anything, in itself like in its skin, the self in its skin both is exposed to the exterior (which does not happen to things) and obsessed by the others in this naked exposure. Does not the self take on itself, through its very impossibility to evade its own identity, toward which, when persecuted, it withdraws? Does not a beginning rise in this passivity? The undeclinability of the ego is the irremissibility of the accusation, from which it can no longer take a distance, which it cannot evade. This impossibility of taking any distance and of slipping away from the Good is a firmness more firm and more profound than that of the will, which is still a tergiversation.

The inability to decline indicates the anachronism of a debt preceding the loan, of an expenditure overflowing one's resources, as in effort. It would be an exigency with regard to oneself where what is possible is not measured by a reflection on oneself, as in the for-itself. In this exigency with regard to oneself the self answering to the exigency does not show itself in the form of a direct object complement – which would be to suppose an equality between self and self. This exigency with regard to oneself without regard for what is possible, that is, beyond all equity, is produced in the form of an accusation preceding the fault, borne against oneself despite one's innocence. For the order of contemplation it is something simply demented. This extreme accusation excludes the declinability of the self, which would have consisted in measuring the possibles in oneself, so as to accuse oneself of this or that, of something committed even if in the form of original sin. The accusation that weighs on the self as a self is an exigency without consideration for oneself. The infinite passion of responsibility, in its return upon itself goes further than its identity,¹⁷ to the hither side or beyond being and the possible, and puts the being in itself in deficit, making it susceptible of being treated as a negative quantity.

But how does the passivity of the self become a 'hold on oneself'? If that is not just a play on words, does it not presuppose an activity behind the absolutely anarchical passivity of obsession, a clandestine and dissimulated freedom? Then what is the object of the exposition developed to this point? We have answered this question in advance with the notion of substitution.

Substitution

In this exposition of the in itself of the persecuted subjectivity, have we been faithful enough to the anarchy of passivity? In speaking of the recurrence of the ego to the self, have we been sufficiently free from the postulates of ontological thought, where the eternal presence to oneself subtends even its absences in the form of a quest, where eternal being, whose possibles are also powers, always takes up what it undergoes, and whatever be its submission, always arises anew as the principle of what happens to it? It is perhaps here, in this reference to a depth of anarchical passivity, that the thought that names creation differs from ontological thought. It is not here a question of justifying the theological context of ontological thought, for the word creation designates a signification older than the context woven about this name. In this context, this said, is already effaced the absolute diachrony of creation, refractory to assembling into a present and a representation. But in creation, what is called to being answers to a call that could not have reached it since, brought out of nothingness, it obeyed before hearing the order. Thus in the concept of creation *ex nihilo*, if it is not a pure nonsense, there is the concept of a passivity that does not revert into an assumption. The self as a creature is conceived in a passivity more passive still than the passivity of matter, that is, prior to the virtual coinciding of a term with itself. The oneself has to be conceived outside of all substantial coinciding of self with self. Contrary to Western thought which unites subjectivity and substantiality, here coinciding is not the norm that already commands all non-coinciding, in the quest it provokes. Then the recurrence to oneself cannot stop at oneself, but goes to the hither side of oneself; *in* the recurrence to oneself there is a going to the hither side of oneself. A does not, as in identity, return to A, but retreats to the hither side of its point of departure. Is not the signification of responsibility for another, which cannot be assumed by any freedom, stated in this trope? Far from being recognized in the freedom of consciousness, which loses itself and finds itself again, which, as a freedom, relaxes the order of being so as to reintegrate it in a free responsibility, the responsibility for the other, the responsibility in obsession, suggests an absolute passivity of a self that has never been able to diverge from itself, to then enter into its limits, and identify itself by recog-