

# Levinas on Freedom and Determinism Between Ethics and Metaphysics

Levinas' central concern is ethics. Nonetheless, Levinas can also be approached as a metaphysician, insofar as he remains a firm believer that there is in fact such a thing as first philosophy. As Michael L. Morgan puts it, for Levinas

philosophy is indeed systematic, in the sense that what it points toward is a study of what is fundamental, that upon which everything else depends. That is, there is a first philosophy, what, ever since the commentators on Aristotle, has been called in the West "metaphysics." ... Philosophy discusses all aspects of the human condition, but in so doing there is a philosophical disclosure of the most fundamental things because human existence does have a kind of foundation. In human existence there is something that comes first, so to speak, and for Levinas that something is ethics.<sup>1</sup>

Morgan puts Levinas in the tradition of Aristotle, that is the tradition of metaphysics, albeit in an unorthodox position in this tradition. Thus, Levinas is not an anti-metaphysical, anti-foundationalist thinker at all — despite his associations with post-structuralism. Instead, Levinas is best understood as a philosopher fundamentally concerned with ethics, but also somebody whose commitment to ethics as first philosophy pushes the field to encompass philosophical concerns that typically belong to far-flung domains — such as aesthetics, metaphysics, and political philosophy. Levinas is interested in neither conventional metaphysics nor conventional ethics, but in a space in-between the two.

This essay explores these interstices by focusing on one particular problematic of Levinas' thought: freedom and determinism. On the one hand, Levinas is committed to an idea of freedom as autonomy. On the other hand, his understanding of ethics is premised on our foundational responsibility for the Other, which is the primary ethical relationship. This seems to impose constraints on our freedom. How can we reconcile these two poles of

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<sup>1</sup> Michael L. Morgan, *The Cambridge Introduction to Emmanuel Levinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

freedom and determinism, or more precisely autonomy and heteronomy? I argue that Levinas develops a profound understanding of freedom *with* others. He is critical of a notion of negative liberty, which he sees as a kind of egoism. His own development of “freedom” is sensitive to historical and social concerns that stem in part from his own personal circumstances.

To explore this problematic, I begin by laying out some background. What does Levinas mean by “ethics,” what is his attitude towards “metaphysics,” and what is the relation between ethics and metaphysics in his thinking? Answering this question will require some consideration of the development of Levinas’ thought, specifically in his engagement with Heidegger. I will dwell on some historical background here, because I think it is essential to understanding Levinas’ later approach to freedom and responsibility. Next, I consider the meaning of “freedom” as contrasted with the “responsibility for the Other” in Levinas’ mature work. Finally, I explore how these two ideas are reconciled in his second *magnum opus*, *Otherwise than Being*. By the end of the paper, we will be able to answer the question: what does a positive freedom *with* others look like in Levinas’ mature synthesis of ethics and metaphysics?

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Emmanuel Levinas was one of “Heidegger’s children.”<sup>2</sup> That is to say, he was one of a group of students who in the 1920s (around the time Heidegger was writing *Being and Time*) fell under the spell of the “hidden king [who] reigned ... in the realm of thinking.”<sup>3</sup> These students, many of whom were Jewish, came to break with their master’s philosophy, most violently after Heidegger’s enthusiastic affiliation with the Nazi regime in 1933.

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<sup>2</sup> To borrow a turn of phrase from Richard Wolin, *Heidegger’s Children: Hannah Arendt, Karl Löwith, Hans Jonas, and Herbert Marcuse* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> To borrow this time from the words of one of Heidegger’s most famous students, writing half a century later: Hannah Arendt, “Heidegger at Eighty,” in *Thinking without a Banister*, ed. Jerome Kohn, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Schocken, 2018), 419–31.

Levinas' relationship with Heidegger is key to understanding his thinking. Both his attitude towards metaphysics and his embrace of ethics as an alternative foundation for philosophy are, I argue, indelibly marked by his lifelong engagement with Heidegger against the backdrop of the latter's Nazism and Levinas' own experience as a Jew in mid-twentieth-century Europe.

In 1928, when Levinas was 22 years old, he travelled to Freiburg to study under Husserl. In an article he wrote for a French publication shortly thereafter, Levinas said:

The town is small, tidy, and pretty. ... But it is the university that gives the vitality and creates the rhythm of a small German university town. ... Freiburg is still a town of Medicine, a town of Chemistry, a town of many other sciences. But, above all, it is *the town of Phenomenology*.<sup>4</sup>

Levinas had been an enthusiastic proponent of Husserl's phenomenology. His 1930 dissertation at the University of Strasbourg was entitled *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*. Yet in Freiburg it was not Husserl himself but Husserl's student, Heidegger, who most attracted Levinas. In 1989, Levinas would reminisce as follows: "To speak the language of a tourist, I had the impression that I was thinking to visit Husserl and found Heidegger instead."<sup>5</sup> Even when he returned to Strasbourg to write his dissertation, which was supposedly on Husserl, he would now view phenomenology from Heidegger's vantage point. As he explained in a 1985 interview:

The work that I did then on "the theory of intuition" in Husserl was thus influenced by *Sein und Zeit*, to the extent that I sought to present Husserl as having perceived the ontological

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<sup>4</sup> My translation; italics preserved from the original French: "La ville est petite, propre et jolie. ... Mais c'est l'Université qui donne l'élan vital et crée ce rythme de la petite ville universitaire allemande, si souvent décrite, chantée, filmée. ... Fribourg est encore une ville de Médecine, une ville de Chimie, la ville de bien d'autres sciences. Mais, avant tout, c'est *la ville de la Phénoménologie*." Emmanuel Levinas, "Fribourg, Husserl et la phénoménologie," *Revue d'Allemagne et des pays de langue allemande* 5, no. 43 (May 1931): 403–4. Reproduced in Emmanuel Levinas, "Fribourg, Husserl et la phénoménologie," in *Les imprévus de l'histoire* (Éditions Fata Morgana, 1994), 94–106.

<sup>5</sup> Emmanuel Levinas and François Poirié, *Emmanuel Levinas: Qui êtes-vous?* (Paris, 1984), 78–79. Translated in Jill Robbins, *Is It Righteous to Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001). See also Emmanuel Levinas, "Séjour de jeunesse auprès d'Husserl," *Le nouveau commerce* 75 (Autumn 1989): 23–29.

problem of being, the question of the *status* rather than the *quiddity* of beings.<sup>6</sup>

Here we can begin to see the substance of Levinas' engagement with Husserl and then with Heidegger.

Specifically, reading Husserl had given him the sense of a method. Levinas writes that it was with Husserl that I discovered the concrete meaning of the very possibility of "working in philosophy" without being straightaway enclosed in a system of dogmas, but at the same time without running the risk of proceeding by chaotic intuitions.<sup>7</sup>

This rigorous method, phenomenology, was thrilling enough in its own right. It opened up the possibility of "radical reflection," a reflection made in "the presence of the philosopher near to things, without illusion or rhetoric, in their true status, precisely clarifying this status."<sup>8</sup> But it was Heidegger who for Levinas brought vitality to this method. He brought phenomenology to bear on core problems of existence, while bracketing questions of beings.

It is in Heidegger's "sovereign exercise of phenomenology" that Levinas finds "the very model of ontology," which is to say "the comprehension of the verb 'to be' ... distinguished from all the disciplines which explore *that* which is, beings."<sup>9</sup> It was this "reeducation of our ear" that in 1985 Levinas still found "unforgettable, even if banal today."<sup>10</sup> Heidegger enabled people to realize that being wasn't just a substantive noun, but in fact "verb par excellence." The task of philosophy then is to answer the question of what it is *to be*, rather than to look for "transcendental conditions in the idealist sense of the term" that phenomenological analysis had previously sought.<sup>11</sup> The "analyses of anxiety, care and being-toward-death" that Heidegger employed in *Sein und Zeit* were aimed at "describing man's being or existing — not his nature."<sup>12</sup> Levinas was thus enamored with the Heidegger of *Sein*

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<sup>6</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 39.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 28–29.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 39–41.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

*und Zeit*, not because of the man — in fact *despite* the man's politics — but rather because of his philosophical insights. Late in his life, Levinas would still say that *Sein und Zeit*

is one of the finest books in the history of philosophy ... My admiration for Heidegger is above all an admiration for *Sein und Zeit*. I always try to relive the ambiance of those readings when 1933 was still unthinkable.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, Levinas' lifelong debt to Heidegger was his lasting concern with metaphysics.

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What happened in 1933? Put simply, the NSDAP came to power in the Weimar Republic and Martin Heidegger enthusiastically affiliated himself with the new regime. Levinas' approach to "first philosophy" would come to look radically different through its concern with ethics. This break is as much a philosophical advance as it is a response to historical developments. For Heidegger's students, Levinas as much as Hannah Arendt and Karl Löwith, *Sein und Zeit* was ripe for critique, made all the more urgent by its author's betrayal through his political choices. In my view, their response preserves the best of Heidegger's insights while thoughtfully engaging with the problem of how philosophy relates to politics and history. As Samuel Moyn vividly puts it in his book on Levinas:

The disciple is like the moon, its brilliance a derivation and reflection of the sun it despairs of becoming itself. If this definition is correct, Heidegger's followers were not disciples. They chose to stare into the face of what they admired and to try to shine with their own light. From the very beginning, they attempted to express their personal allegiance to their teacher through philosophical attack.<sup>14</sup>

This philosophical critique of Heidegger is hard to separate from the personal animosity that would come to dominate his relationship with his Jewish students after 1933. Indeed, Arendt, Löwith, and Levinas would come to see a strong (though perhaps not inseparable) connection between Heidegger's philosophy and his Nazi sympathies. This connection rests on Heidegger's treatment of intersubjectivity in *Being and Time*.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>14</sup> Samuel Moyn, *Origins of the Other: Emmanuel Levinas between Revelation and Ethics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 84.

One of Heidegger's great moves in progressing from Husserl was to highlight the importance of intersubjectivity: *Mitsein*, being-with-others, to use Heidegger's own terminology. In the *Cartesian Meditations*, Husserl links his phenomenology to that of Descartes, with both founding their philosophy on a solitary, solipsistic ego. The Other for Husserl is then just an *alter* ego. Heidegger responds that the self is never alone. Even when *Dasein* is alone, he is in a parasitic relationship with others. As Heidegger writes:

The phenomenological assertion that "Dasein is essentially Being-with" has an existential-ontological meaning. It does not seek to establish ontically that factually I am not present-at-hand alone, and that Others of my kind occur. If this were what is meant by the proposition that Dasein's Being-in-the-world is essentially constituted by Being-with, then Being-with would not be an existential attribute which Dasein, of its own accord, has coming to it from its own kind of Being. It would rather be something which turns up in every case by reason of the occurrence of Others. Being-with is an existential characteristic of Dasein even when factually no Other is present-at-hand or perceived. Even Dasein's Being-alone is Being-with in the world.<sup>15</sup>

This is the Heidegger that I can imagine Levinas falling for. Heidegger takes up a classic problem of phenomenology, intersubjectivity, and makes it a matter of basic metaphysics. The way we relate to other people is different than the way we relate to objects. When we describe the world around us (as in phenomenology), we encounter not just equipment but also Others. These Others

who are thus 'encountered' in a ready-to-hand, environmental context of equipment, are not somehow added on in thought to some Thing which is proximally just present-at-hand; such 'Things' are encountered from out of the world in which they are ready-to-hand for Others — a world which is always mine too in advance. ... 'With' and 'too' are to be understood *existentially*, not categorially. By reason of this *with-like* [*mithaften*] Being-in-the-world, the world is always the one that I share with Others. The world of *Dasein* is a *with-world* [*Mitwelt*]. Being-in is Being-with Others. Their Being-in-themselves within-the-world is *Dasein-with* [*MitDasein*].<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1967), 120; Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 156–57.

<sup>16</sup> Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 118; Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 154.

In *Being and Time* we find a theory of others that is fundamentally metaphysical yet edges towards ethical concerns. This is the problematic that Levinas takes up in pursuing his project of “ethics as first philosophy.”

Both Arendt and Löwith recognized this crossroads even before 1933, when Heidegger’s Nazi turn prompted his students to look more deeply into his philosophy for possible “signs” of this political affinity. Yet Levinas was the one who took on the project in full. As Samuel Moyn writes:

Only one of Heidegger’s students, Emmanuel Levinas, spent the rest of his career, in the aftermath of Heidegger’s shocking affiliation with Nazism in 1933, attempting to cure his teacher’s approach, as if the philosophy of intersubjectivity, when corrected, would hold the key to the future of philosophy as a whole.<sup>17</sup>

Levinas’ break with Heidegger is announced in his 1934 article “Some Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism.” Summarizing the article, Moyn writes that

Levinas expressed the belief that Heidegger had turned onto a road that had Hitlerism as an ultimate or at least a possible destination. And Levinas, to his understandable chagrin, had followed him down it.<sup>18</sup>

This is the crisis that provoked Levinas’ evolution from Heideggerian phenomenology. But his choice is not really to reject Heidegger, which would mean refusing his analysis of intersubjectivity, but rather, paradoxically, to lean *into* it. To get *out* of Heidegger, one has to work *through* him.

This much provides a sketch of the framework for Levinas’ later work. He carries on the concern with metaphysics from Husserl and Heidegger. He undertakes a sort of radical break, driven profoundly by the Nazi rise to power and Heidegger’s “betrayal” of his students at Freiburg. In so doing, Levinas turns to intersubjectivity, revisiting the key passage in *Being and Time* where Heidegger elaborates the importance of *Mitsein*.

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<sup>17</sup> Moyn, *Origins of the Other*, 85.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

Against this backdrop, let us now turn to focus on the particular problematic at hand: freedom and determinism. As we will see, the return to Heideggerian intersubjectivity is key to understanding Levinas' approach to freedom.

Levinas often likes to present the ethical relation by beginning with the "face-to-face" encounter. He says that

access to the face is straightaway ethical. You turn yourself toward the other as toward an object when you see a nose, eyes, a forehead, a chin, and you can describe them ... but what is specifically the face is what cannot be reduced to that.<sup>19</sup>

Here we can hear echoes of *Being and Time*: a clear insistence that our encounter with the Other is metaphysically different than our encounter with other things. Where Levinas moves beyond Heidegger is that he sees the encounter with the Other as in fact *transcending* being:

The face is meaning all by itself. You are you. In this sense one can say that the face is not "seen." It is what cannot become a content, which your thought would embrace; it is uncontainable, it leads you beyond. It is in this that the signification of the face makes it escape from being, as a correlate of a knowing. Vision, to the contrary, is a search for adequation; it is what par excellence absorbs being. But the relation to the face is straightaway ethical.<sup>20</sup>

Coming face-to-face with another person is the basic ethical relation, which exists beyond being. Heidegger thought that the encounter with the Other is important, but serves the higher purpose of ultimately helping us answer the question of Being. What matters most for Heidegger in the end is not being-with-others but the question of Being that *Mitsein* helps us answer. Levinas, by contrast, makes the encounter with the Other primary. Instead of *Mitsein* answering a larger question of Being, the ethical face-to-face encounter is primary in and of itself. This is what it means for Levinas to say that ethics is first philosophy.

In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas' first great mature work, he sketches the relationship with Heidegger by explaining how our relationship with the Other exceeds a relationship of knowing, which he sees exemplified in phenomenology:

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<sup>19</sup> Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 86.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.



Consciousness then does not consist in equaling being with representation, in tending to the full light in which this adequation is to be sought, but rather in overflowing this play of lights — this phenomenology — and in accomplishing *events* whose ultimate signification (contrary to the Heideggerian conception) does not lie in *disclosing*. Philosophy does indeed discover the signification of these events, but they are produced without discovery (or truth) being their destiny. ... Phenomenology is a method for philosophy, but phenomenology — the comprehension effected through a bringing to light — does not constitute the ultimate event of being itself. The relation between the same and the other is not always reducible to knowledge of the other by the same, nor even to the *revelation* of the other to the same, which is already fundamentally different from disclosure.<sup>21</sup>

The relationship of the same with the Other is not about knowing, but is in fact an excess, a beyond knowing. The event of the other is a *disturbance*, not a representation. As Gabriela Bastera helpfully elucidates it:

This constitutive excess in the subject which is not reducible to the subject is what we may call unsatisfactorily “event of the other,” or “event-other,” tropes that name something for which we lack concepts and words. How does this irreducible excess *arouse* subjectivity, and how does our ethical constitution appear to the necessarily limited perspective of self-consciousness we as subjects occupy? We only intuit this event when we find ourselves responding to something we cannot master: the event of the other disturbs the order of being and discourse ... Acknowledging the limit imposed on his philosophical language by a constitutive excess, the challenge Levinas must meet ... is that of signifying ethical disturbance in the subject and the world without reducing it to a representation.<sup>22</sup>

Levinas must explain just how it is that our encounter with the Other is prior even to existence.

It is just this challenge that Levinas takes up in his late work *Otherwise than Being*.

He does so by focusing on how our subjectivity is constituted by our responsibility for the Other. Levinas writes:

We will say that since the Other looks at me, I am responsible for him, without even having *taken* on responsibilities in his regard; his responsibility *is incumbent on me*. ... Responsibility in fact is not a simple attribute of subjectivity, as if the latter already existed in itself, before the ethical relationship. Subjectivity is not for itself; it is, once again, initially for another.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 27–28.

<sup>22</sup> Gabriela Bastera, *The Subject of Freedom: Kant, Levinas* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 112.

<sup>23</sup> Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 96.

Again, we can see Levinas radicalizing Heidegger. Not only is our encounter with the Other as face primary; our very constitution as a subject is in fact a consequence of the responsibility for the Other that emerges from this encounter. Indeed, our encounter with the face generates a responsibility for the Other that, paradoxically, gives us our freedom.

Levinas thus writes:

The being that expresses itself imposes itself, but does so precisely by appealing to me with its destitution and nudity — its hunger — without my being able to be deaf to that appeal. Thus in expression the being that imposes itself does not limit but promotes my freedom, by arousing my goodness. The order of responsibility, where the gravity of ineluctable being freezes all laughter, is also the order where freedom is ineluctably invoked. It is thus the irremissible weight of being that gives rise to my freedom.<sup>24</sup>

The being that appeals to me does not *impose* but *promotes* my freedom. We have now traced the paradox of freedom and determinism from Levinas' originary break with Heidegger through to his laying out the consequences of making ethics first philosophy.

In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas' second *magnum opus*, he expands on this paradox of freedom and determinism by focusing on our constitution as subjects in the encounter with the other. Levinas writes that our subjectivity, and thus our freedom as subjects too, emerges from

the extraordinary and everyday event of my responsibility for the faults or the misfortune of others, in my responsibility that answers for the freedom of another, in the astonishing human fraternity in which fraternity, conceived with Cain's sober coldness, would not by itself explain the responsibility between separated beings it calls for. The freedom of another could never begin in my freedom, that is, abide in the same present, be contemporary, be representable to me. The responsibility for the other can not have begun in my commitment, in my decision. The unlimited responsibility in which I find myself comes from the hither side of my freedom, from a "prior to every memory," an "ulterior to every accomplishment," from the non-present par excellence, the non-original, the anarchical, prior to or beyond essence. The responsibility for the other is the locus in which is situated the null-site of subjectivity, where the privilege of the question "Where?" no longer holds.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 200.

<sup>25</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 10.

Here we begin to see how even freedom emerges from our responsibility for the Other. The face transcends even being; it is “anarchical, prior to or beyond essence.” My relation to the Other constitutes my own being as a self; it is the “null-site of subjectivity.” In particular, the locus of this “null-site” is the responsibility for the other. But this “origin” is an-archival, which means it is not really a beginning (*arché* is the Greek word a beginning).

To narrow in on the question of freedom: it might be tempting to make an analogy between Levinas’ “null-site” and the state of nature, within which every human is naturally free. But this would be to fall back into the trap of signifying, representing, disclosing the relation to the other. To say it is straight-away ethical is to say that we cannot pin it down as a beginning. As Levinas writes:

The non-present is in-comprehensible by reason of its immensity or its “superlative” humility of, for example, its goodness, which is the superlative itself. The non-present here is invisible, separated (or sacred) and thus a non-origin, an-archival. The Good cannot become present or enter into a representation. The present is a beginning in my freedom, whereas the Good is not presented to freedom; it has chosen me before I have chosen it. No one is good voluntarily. We can see the formal structure of nonfreedom in a subjectivity which does not have time to choose the Good and thus is penetrated with its rays unbeknownst to itself. But subjectivity sees this nonfreedom redeemed, exceptionally, by the goodness of the Good. The exception is unique. And if no one is good voluntarily, no one is enslaved to the Good.<sup>26</sup>

Our responsibility precedes our freedom. In fact, we are free *because* we are responsible for the other before anything else. We are not good voluntarily, because there is no *voluntas* (will) before our responsibility to the other. Levinas says this is in fact what makes us truly free. Because we do not choose to be good, we are not slaves to the good. We are free *because we do not choose* to be responsible. This is the crux of the paradox: how can we be free through obligation to somebody else, an obligation we do not freely take on?

If the ethical relation is primary, then the other aspects of Levinas’ philosophy must follow from it. For instance, political and social philosophy are based on ethics. As Levinas

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., II.

says, “politics must be able in fact always to be checked and criticized starting from the ethical.”<sup>27</sup> Free sociality too begins in this relation. Levinas writes:

The real must not only be determined in its historical objectivity, but also from interior intentions, from the *secrecy* that interrupts the continuity of historical time. Only starting from this secrecy is the pluralism of society possible.<sup>28</sup>

This sounds like a liberal notion of freedom, where a free society is constituted by individuals with a right to privacy and secrecy. But when asked about this point, Levinas pushes away from such a strict understanding of secrecy:

What we have said up to now is only negative. ... It is extremely important to know if society in the current sense of the term is the result of a limitation of the principle that men are predators of one another, or if to the contrary it results from the limitation of the principle that men are *for* one another. Does the social, with its institutions, universal forms and laws, result from limiting the consequences of the war between men, or from limiting the infinity which opens in the ethical relationship of man to man?<sup>29</sup>

Levinas here sketches the two opposing versions of freedom: negative (free of restrictions) and positive (based on our relations with each other). The first corresponds to a society that begins in a Hobbesian state of nature, where “men are predators of one another” — *homo homini lupus*. The second corresponds to a society where to be free is to be in community with others — “the infinity which opens in the ethical relationship of man to man.” It seems like Levinas would lean towards the latter, since he founds freedom in the ethical responsibility for the Other. But his comments on secrecy seem to imply the opposite.

Pluralism in society, Levinas says, begins with privacy (my interpretation of “secrecy”).

When pushed on this point, Levinas explains that he refers to

a secrecy which does not hold to a closure which would isolate some rigorously private domain of a closed interiority, but a secrecy which holds to the responsibility for the Other. This would be a responsibility which is inaccessible in its ethical advent, from which one does not escape, and which, thus, is the principle of an absolute individuation.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 80.

<sup>28</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 57–58.

<sup>29</sup> Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 80.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

The secrecy is a “principle of an absolute individuation.” In other words, the reason secrecy is important is because it demarcates the self from the other, not to make a rigorous private domain — for that would be (neo)liberalism — but rather to form distinct subjects out of the “infinity which opens in the ethical relationship of man to man.”

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So far I have outlined a few ways “into” the problematic of freedom and determinism in Levinas’ thought. In this last section, I will sketch what Levinas’ solution is as described in his last great work, *Otherwise than Being*.

What is essentially at issue here is how the subject of freedom is constituted. In

*Otherwise than Being*, Levinas writes:

But in the responsibility for the Other, for another freedom, the negativity of this anarchy, this refusal of the present, of appearing, of the immemorial, commands me and ordains me to the other, to the first one on the scene, and makes me approach him, makes me his neighbor. It thus diverges from nothingness as well as from being. It provokes this responsibility against my will, that is, by substituting me for the other as a hostage. All my inwardness is invested in the form of a despite-me, for-another. Despite-me, for-another, is signification par excellence. And it is the sense of the “oneself,” that accusative that derives from no nominative; it is the very fact of finding oneself while losing oneself.<sup>31</sup>

In the ethical relationship freedom is founded in a double sense. First, through the “secrecy” that Levinas described earlier, the subject is demarcated from the Other. Then, in the encounter with the face, the Other takes on a responsibility for the Other. I do not *choose* to be responsible, because *I* do not exist before this responsibility: “The unlimited responsibility in which I find myself comes from the hither side of my freedom, from a ‘prior to every memory,’ an ‘ulterior to every accomplishment,’ from the non-present par excellence, the non-original, the anarchical, prior to or beyond essence.”<sup>32</sup> Levinas says there is no contradiction between my freedom and my responsibility, because both are founded on my subjectivity, and my subjectivity is founded in the ethical relationship. To be precise, the

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<sup>31</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 11.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

responsibility is not even an origin for my freedom and my subjectivity; it is transcendent, it is a non-origin. To call it an origin would be to say that it *is*. But the origin is in fact otherwise than being, beyond being.

Here we come full circle to Levinas' original break with Heidegger. Heidegger saw *Mitsein* (the encounter with the Other) as a way into the question of Being. That is to say, being-with-others is an origin of Being (and therefore of subjectivity and freedom). In that sense, being-with-others, even though subordinate to the quest for Being, comes first. For Levinas to break with Heidegger, it would not suffice to merely insist on ethics as primary. In a sense, Heidegger was already doing so in *Being and Time*. At first Levinas might simply be following through and radicalizing the road Heidegger didn't take when he came to the crossroads of *Mitsein*. But ultimately Levinas tries to go a step further and say that the responsibility for the Other is *non-originary*. The face is transcendent; it calls from beyond. It is not an originary being but rather *otherwise than being*.

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It might seem that I have given no solution to the paradox of freedom and determinism in Levinas' thought. But what I have endeavoured to show is that there is no paradox if Levinas is understood properly. What we see as problematic — a tension between the subject's freedom and his responsibility for the Other — rests on a confusion of origins, an importation of *Being and Time* that *Otherwise than Being* has as its primary task to refuse and unravel. In particular, the paradox of freedom and determinism thoughtfully understood is the question of being-with-others in relation to Being. For Heidegger, to be with others is one way in which Being is disclosed; for Levinas, the Other is transcendent, and our relationship to him/it cannot be simply signified as an origin. To expand on the consequences of this move would be to unravel the spool of *Otherwise than Being*, a task that must remain for future work.

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