Stine Holte

Meaning and Melancholy in the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas

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List of abbreviations

Levinas:

AE	*Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*
DDVI	*De Dieu qui vient à l'idée*
DL	*Difficile Liberté*
EDEHH	*En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl and Heidegger*
EE	*De l'existence à l'existant*
EI	*Ethique et infini*
OE	*On Escape [orig. De l'évasion]*
OBBE	*Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence (translation of AE)*
PN	*Proper names [orig. Noms propres]*
RO	*La réalité et son ombre*
SS	*La signification et le sens*
TI	*Totalité et infini*
TA	*Le temps et l'autre*
QRPH	*Quelques réflexions sur la philosophie de l'hitlérisme*

Heidegger:

Hei: SZ	*Sein und Zeit*
Hei: GdP	*Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie*
Hei: Kant	*Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik*

Husserl:

Hu: CM	*Cartesianische Meditationen*
Hu: Ideen II	*Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie*

Derrida:

Der: VM	*Violence et métaphysique*

Kant:

Kant: KrV	*Kritik der reinen Vernunft*

Freud:

Freud: MM	*Mourning and Melancholy [orig. Trauer und Melancholie]*

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Introduction

In one of Isaiah Berlin's famous essays, he divides thinkers into "foxes" and "hedgehogs", according to an old Greek myth: Foxes know many small things, whereas hedgehogs know one big thing. In his introductory essay on Emmanuel Levinas, Hilary Putnam refers to this dichotomy and characterizes Levinas as "one of the hedgehogs we need to listen to" (Putnam 2002, 58). In a similar manner, Jacques Derrida compared Levinas' thinking "with the crashing of a wave on a beach, always the same wave returning and repeating its movement with deeper insistence" (Der: VM 124). Although these references to hedgehogs and repeating waves suggest a somehow problematic one-sidedness, it is at the same time clear that both Putnam and Derrida believe Levinas' concern to be an important one. What, then, is the "insistent wave" that recurs in the thinking of this "hedgehog"? The recurring theme will be known to anyone who has involved him- or herself with Levinas' work: ethics – in the sense of otherness – as a first philosophy. However, Levinas' concern is not primarily the construction of *an* ethics, but – as he puts it in *Ethics and Infinity* – to seek "the meaning of the ethical" ("Ma tâche ne consiste pas à construire l'éthique; j'essaie seulement d'en chercher le sens") (EI 85).

This little "manifesto" of Levinas shall serve as the point of departure for this investigation and is interesting for several reasons. First of all, one may discuss what *ethics* means to Levinas: what is its signification or content? This has been the focus of several studies and will also play a certain role here. A keyword would here be radical responsibility for the Other, often exemplified by Levinas in the simple phrase "Après Vous, monsieur," but also involving an immediacy of the relationship that makes me responsible before I am able to judge and reflect upon it. One may also, however, put the emphasis on a more existential level, on the word *meaning* (sens), asking how ethics can be meaningful at all in Levinas' thought. This question is relevant not only in light of his way of reversing the phenomenological notion of meaning as intentionality, but also in light of his later description of the ethical encounter with the Other in rather pathological terms, as "traumatism," and also very close to the meaninglessness of melancholy. This tension between the meaning and melancholy of ethics is one of the main interests of this study. In order to investigate this properly, however, one has to discuss yet a third aspect of the "manifesto": What does it mean that Levinas so clearly points out that he is *not* interested in constructing an ethics? Does it mean, for example, that his thinking is not really directly applicable on what one might call the "ethical

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situation," so that it would be mistaken to read his descriptions of traumatism as ethical imperatives?

Whatever focus one chooses to approach the question of the meaning of the ethical, it is crucial to keep in mind the importance of *otherness* in Levinas' work. Simon Critchley summarizes Levinas' main concern as "the putting in question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other" (Critchley 1999, 1, 5). In Levinas' thinking, otherness is the source of ethical subjectivity and responsibility, and thereby different from, say, philosophies that take autonomy or the ideal of a good life as the foundational principles of ethics. This does not mean that otherness becomes a new foundational principle from which a new ethics can be deduced; rather, Levinas rejects the notion of foundation when he speaks of the ethical and claims that the source of ethics is an-archic (which is not meant in a political sense). His thinking is not founded in a beginning, a principle or an *arché*, which also implies a refusal of the foundation of most of the Western philosophical tradition – and ontology in particular. Ethics signifies, as Levinas says in the title of one of his main works, *otherwise than being or beyond essence*. This radical questioning of ontology is particularly directed against Martin Heidegger, Levinas' former teacher, whom he once admired and whose philosophical framework he remained strongly dependent upon, even after Heidegger's deeply disappointing affiliation with Nazism. Simply put, for Levinas the fundamental problem with Nazism is the same as it is for thinkers like Theodor W. Adorno or Zygmunt Bauman: its unwillingness to see human beings as individuals and not merely as exemplars. Levinas sees this tendency reflected in Heidegger's ontology, which for him is incapable of reaching the ethical *Other* – as radical transcendence.

The question of what or who the notion of ethical otherness refers to in Levinas is not straightforward. On the one hand, it is clear that Levinas refuses to acknowledge the radical transcendence of an otherness that is independent from the interpersonal relationship. At the same time, the emphasis on anarchy is but one of many allusions to an aspect of invisibility or distance of the Other in his work, which implies that otherness is neither reducible to the relationship with the other human being. But what is this "more" of otherness? The rejection of ontology as well as the rejection of any foundational principle indeed says something about what ethics is *not*. But is it possible to say something at all about the meaning of the ethical except through via negativa, except that it is *otherwise?* And how is this question of a "more" of otherness connected with the second question above? Whether ethics may be seen as meaningful at all or whether it is rather a melancholic affair?

As we shall see, it is perhaps the interpretations of otherness – both among Levinas' adherents and his critics – that causes the most persistent and interesting discussions about the meaning of the ethical in Levinas' philosophy. Although most readers agree that the Other in question is somehow ungraspable (beyond both the interpersonal Other and the onto-

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theological Other of classical metaphysics), there is nevertheless no agreement on how this ungraspable Other should be approached. Some readers read Levinas' work primarily according to a religious or metaphysical tradition that sees the Other as a (Platonic or Neoplatonic) good beyond being, an expression Levinas also refers to. Other readers refuse such a notion of religious goodness to the benefit of a more neutral alterity, closer to Blanchot, Beckett or Adorno, though still for the sake of ethics.[1] The crucial question is perhaps whether the relationship to the Other may be said to secure meaning not only for the Other for whom the subject is responsible, but also for the responsible self. Whether the first approach is eager to defend the meaningfulness or even redemptiveness of Levinas' ethics, the second tends to emphasize the more melancholic tone in his work, excluding at least any easy kind of redemption. And indeed, both approaches seem to rely on main tendencies in Levinas' work itself, which is marked by both redemption and the nonredemptive, both meaning and melancholy. So let us start by getting an overview of the ambiguity in Levinas' work before we suggest what is at stake for different readers and how this should lead our investigation further.

To a certain degree, an ambiguity of the notion of otherness may be seen between Levinas first main work, *Totalité et Infini,* and his second, *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence.* The first work carries the subtitle "An essay of exteriority," and it is indeed the notion of an otherness which is radically exterior to the subject that dominates the analyses of ethical signification. This radical exteriority does not exclude its influence on the subject, which happens through the ability of exteriority to express itself as *face*, thereby bringing about goodness in terms of responsibility (TI 219). At the same time, Levinas will strongly emphasize the radical separation between the Other and the self, a separation that implies that the relationship with the Other is a relationship in which there is no mediation or image (TI 218). *Totalité et Infini,* in other words, is marked by a strong ethical iconoclasm, where not only exterior, but also interior images are forbidden because they necessarily do violence to what they seek to capture. The phenomenological direction is thus turned around, so that meaning in its deepest sense is not constituted by the subject itself, but radically given or revealed by the Other. This does not mean that phenomenality is rejected as meaningless; rather, Levinas will here indeed give profound analyses of conditions like enjoyment, fecundity and love, mostly considered as having a pre-ethical significance. Both these analyses and his more ethical ones are marked by a strong sense of hope, and this is connected to the role that futurity plays for Levinas, particularly here and in his earlier work *Time and the Other.* The hope for radical futurity or renewal of time is contrasted with a strong melancholy of presence, in which everything remains in sameness.

1 Among the works I refer to in this study, those of Catherine Chalier and Richard Cohen are representative for the first approach, whereas Simon Critichley represents the second.

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In his second main work, *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*, temporality continues to play an important role in Levinas' analyses, but now not so much in terms of futurity and hope. Instead, the notion of an unreachable past comes to influence the notion of the Other in a way that more strongly leaves the subject in the melancholy of its absence. Nor does the transcendence of the Other exclude its influence here on the subject in terms of responsibility, but this influence is described in much more somber terms compared with the atmosphere of optimism in his former work. The encounter with the Other is here characterized as obsession, persecution and as a "madness of the soul," leaving the subject traumatized and thereby without the ability to object to the responsibility imposed upon it. The idea of immediacy is, in other words, radicalized, as is seemingly also the extent of responsibility. This becomes visible through the core motif of *substitution*, in which the Other is so deeply interwoven in the structure of the self that the subject not only takes on responsibility for the misery of the Other, but also for his or her very responsibility. Another important aspect of the ethical relationship is its radical passivity, which is exemplified in the biblical reference to the "turning of the other cheek." We will have to go thoroughly into the ethical significance of such passages, but let it suffice here to note how radical descriptions of ethical responsibility correspond to what Levinas expresses in his – for our purposes – important essay "Notes sur le sens" from the same period. There Levinas determines the ultimate question not as a question of why there is being and not nothing, but as the self-scrutinizing question: "Do I have the right to be?"

Now, many people – Levinas included – would claim that his project nevertheless remains the same throughout the various phases – that he remains a "hedgehog" despite the displacements in language and method. But there is undeniably a certain change of mood in Levinas' texts, from optimism to pessimism, from a more hopeful to a more melancholic approach (although the early period is not without the latter and vice versa). It was this change that led Paul Ricoeur to accuse the Levinas of *Autrement qu'être* of having left his early language of the Other as a master of justice, to the benefit of an "excessive" language, where the Other rather becomes a persecutor by whom the self is so crushed that it is no longer able to respond. The obvious danger with such pathological descriptions of the ethical is that they may appear to eclipse the limits between ethics and insanity, leaving the self unprotected from possible abuse. Other readers, however, have attempted to defend Levinas' project, by pointing out the misunderstanding in the direct application of such quotes, supported by the claim that he is not really interested in constructing an ethical system.

I agree that it is too simple to disclaim Levinas' ethics as an ethics of self-sacrifice, both because many of Levinas' pathological descriptions should be read at a more fundamental level concerning the constitution of the self, and because there are also modifications and "repairing" elements to his thought

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(as we shall see is implied in the notion of the third). At the same time, this is not to say that Levinas does not challenge the limit between ethics and insanity. The attentive reader would perhaps ask whether not such a concern with the past, the lack of hope and the excess of guilt visible in his texts are not really expressions of goodness in the relationship to the Other, but rather symptoms of a real melancholy or depression, either on a personal level or linked to a cultural breakdown of meaning. The question becomes pressing when we consider the contextuality of Levinas' work. Being a Jew, Levinas himself was imprisoned in France during the Second World War, whereas most of his relatives and those of his wife died in the concentration camps. The explanations of personal traumatization or even survivor guilt are tempting in light of the way Levinas describes the guilt or even shame connected with ethical responsibility.

Although we should be careful not to explain away Levinas' concerns based on simplified psychological analyses, I believe it *is* important to understand this situation of crisis in which his thinking evolves, in order to understand why things matter to him the way they do. Levinas himself did not deny that this situation influenced his work: The epigram in Hebrew to his second main work is dedicated to those among the nearest who died in the Holocaust. But as we will see, the situation of crisis was a theme in Levinas' work long before the consciousness of the Holocaust and horrifying experience of personal loss. And although one may certainly link the crisis of meaning visible in his work to such personal experiences, I believe it is more fruitful to connect it to a general post-war crisis of modernity and rationality – in response to which Levinas provides his own answers with his emphasis on the concrete encounter with the Other. Zygmunt Bauman understood Levinas in light of this situation, where the Otherness of the Other – which Levinas famously determines with the word *face* – would be seen as an answer to this crisis, as something that restores meaning as the concrete and particular as opposed to the violence of theory and the universal. In *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Bauman attempts to apply Levinas' notion of the face to the visibility of the marginalized. I believe that this reading is not directly misleading, although Bauman could be criticized for not attending enough to the important aspect of invisibility in Levinas' thought.[2]

What is more interesting for our investigation, however, is whether the crisis of meaning – in terms of melancholy on a personal or cultural level – can really be overcome through ethics – or whether the crisis is drawn into the ethical itself. This brings us back to the different readings of Levinas mentioned above and the question of the "more" of otherness. On the one hand, this "more" may be understood in light of the collective melancholic loss

2 Josh Cohen is an example of this when he claims that "where Levinas's ethics reads as an explicit challenge to the thinking of the Other as a mere datum of phenomenological experience, Bauman's post-Auschwitz ethics rests on just this phenomenalization of alterity" (J. Cohen 2003, 3).

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created by the absence of metaphysical guarantors of meaning. Simon Critchley has done this with, and partly beyond, Levinas, questioning the whole idea that ethics is able to restore meaning in terms of an *overcoming*. Inspired by thinkers like Beckett and Blanchot, Critchley explores the neutral alterity or what he also calls atheist transcendence implied in the notion of dying, and finds the parallels to psychoanalysis more relevant to understanding Levinas' concern than metaphysical implications. Critchley thus reads Levinas in part contrary to his own intentions, as both the relevance of a certain metaphysics and skepticism toward the psychoanalytical paradigm are clearly stated in Levinas' work.

The importance of the religious dimension of Levinas work is underlined by the statement recounted in Derrida's book *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, where Levinas claims that what really occupied him in his work was neither ethics nor ethics alone, but rather the holy. Other readers have advocated reading Levinas in this vein, that the ethical Other is not at all a neutral alterity, but a goodness that may not be seen apart from a religious notion of God. Catherine Chalier is among the readers who have most clearly emphasized the relevance of Levinas' Jewish background for understanding his thought, and she has also been concerned with defending Levinas' thought against those who argue that his ethics is pathological.

As will become clear throughout this study, I also believe that the religious dimension of otherness is crucial for grasping the meaning of the ethical for Levinas. But this does not mean that Critchley's analyses are completely without value. On the contrary, I believe that analyses of the melancholic dimension and the difficulties of overcoming are central elements in Levinas' religious approach. We shall thus see that Levinas' ethical religion is not at all a naïve religion of revelation, nor is it metaphysics in its classical or onto-theological form. Rather, it is a thinking that is at pains to bring the religious ideas into the context of phenomenology: Levinas wants to take phenomenology beyond phenomenology. The question, however, is how this is possible without undermining its philosophical credibility. Famously, Dominique Janicaud believed it was not possible, neither in Levinas nor in his followers, starting a whole debate around the so-called "theological turn" of French phenomenology.

There are certainly aspects in Levinas' thinking which are difficult to infer from a simple analysis of phenomena. But if we analyze how transcendence is conceived, particularly in his later work, it is clear that Levinas is very much concerned with the question of how transcendence is expressed in phenomenological concreteness: It is there through the *sensible* exposure of the self that transcendence is testified. This again shows the relevance of the pathological motives the more psychoanalytically oriented readers have paid attention to. But what kind of pathos or pathology is in question here?

One of the most interesting aspects of Levinas' work is indeed the ethico-religious meaning he gives the pathology in question. His thinking may indeed

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seem pathological (also in a medical sense) if we consider the pathological language of trauma and madness of the soul as openness to suffering. But instead of reducing the pathology to the margins of society as madness, it is elevated to its *religious* meaning: The madness of the soul is not the madness of the outcast, but the madness of the Messiah. This messianism is for Levinas not about some historical or future redeemer, but about the responsible self as "supporting the universe."

If not straightforwardly rejected as a product of a schizophrenic illusion, many people would nevertheless find such a notion of the messianic subject problematic, for various reasons. Whereas some religiously oriented readers would have trouble with the notion of a redemption involving the subject itself having a redeeming function, others would rather question the philosophical validity of the whole notion of redemption and messianism. What is interesting for Levinas and for us, however, is not to argue for the *existence* of a religious or metaphysical redemptive moment, but to develop how it may brings essential new insight in the question of the *meaning of the ethical.*

I hope this study may say something about a) what ethics means for Levinas, b) how ethics struggle between meaningful and melancholic tendencies, and c) why Levinas does not want to construct an ethics, but rather find its meaning in an ethical-religious passivity. To this end, the study relies mainly on close readings of important passages in Levinas' main works, though it also discusses his work in relation to other relevant approaches both within and outside of phenomenology. Since much of the discussion concentrates on the tension between the meaning and melancholy (or pathology) of ethics, I especially attend to the later works in which these topics are more explicit. But I also go into relevant passages from some of his earliest works, which are particularly interesting for my questioning. Levinas' most famous work, *Totalité et Infini*, will also be introduced in some of the chapters, but it does not play any major role.

The study is divided into two parts. In the first part, the main focus lies on Levinas' early and middle work, the aim being to relate the question of the meaning of the ethical to the phenomenological tradition. In this part I use the broad categories of light and darkness, which Levinas also refers to on several occasions, in order to describe the moments of meaning and meaninglessness in a phenomenological or ontological approach to reality. This includes not only references to the analyses of Husserl and Heidegger as the two main representatives of this direction, but also to Levinas' own analyses of such an approach. The analyses of esthetics are here particularly important, as they display a tension between meaning and the meaningless (or light and darkness) within ontological reality itself. The same may be said of the so-called amphibology of being and beings from Levinas' later period, which I also discuss in this chapter as it is relevant for understanding the changes that take place between Levinas' two main works.

In the second part, I focus mainly on a dimension of these changes that

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concerns the more important role that Levinas in his later work assigns to the responsible subject as a sensible trace of transcendence. Here it is necessary to go thoroughly into the question of selfhood, which serves as a condition for the wider discussion of trauma and melancholy, and into the question of how Levinas is to be read as an ethical thinker. The analysis of the religious dimension of ethical transcendence shall further be of crucial importance for the discussion of the meaning and meaninglessness of the ethical, which is particularly interesting in light of Levinas' later work and the notion of sensible transcendence.

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Part 1: The Light And Darkness Of Phenomenological Meaning

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1.1. The meaning of the ethical

Beyond phenomenological meaning

Despite the religious and metaphysical notions that pervades his thinking, in the interview with Philippe Nemo called *Ethique et Infini* Levinas maintains that he both remains faithful to the essential truth of Husserlian thought (EI 20 – 21), and that it is impossible to go back to pre-Heideggerian thought (EI 28). This faithfulness does not necessarily concern all the results of their phenomenological research, but rather the framework and methods, whose potential he uses to develop his own thinking. Moreover, Levinas shares with both Husserl and Heidegger the strong emphasis on the question of meaning, although Levinas' answer to the question of the meaning of the ethical indeed reveals important differences from Husserl's and Heidegger's notions thereof. Their notion of meaning as intentionality may be said to belong to the very essence of phenomenological method, but it is necessary to distinguish between different implications that this notion has in phenomenology.

With his notion of intentionality in terms of *Sinngebung* Husserl had meant to transform the way of thinking the world and the relationship between the exterior and interior. As John Drabinski puts it, "reflection and world are traditionally conceived (e. g., in British empiricism) in terms of the opposition of the inner and outer. In Husserl's hands, however, idealism transforms the very notions of interior and exterior – reflective consciousness and world – through the reducing of the 'what' of that which appears to the 'how' of its appearing" (Drabinski 2001, 49). This relationship or directedness in the conception of things and the world is crucial to intentionality. The phenomenological attention to the relationship between the intending and the intended is thereby opposed to what in phenomenology is seen as a naïve representational approach, which in Levinas' formulation "aborde les êtres comme s'ils étaient des substances," without interest. As Levinas observes, phenomenology instead learns that such an immediate presence of things "ne comprend pas encore le sens des choses, et, par conséquent, ne remplace pas la vérité" (EDEHH 176). In other words, as conceived in phenomenology truth is not separable from the question of meaning – and meaning is implied in any relationship with the world, as expressed in the following quote from Husserl: "Ich kann in keine andere Welt hineinleben, hineinerfahren, hineinwerten und – handeln, als die in mir und aus mir selbst Sinn und Geltung hat" (Hu: CM §8, 22).

Although Heidegger shares most of Husserl's concerns, he is eager to emphasize the differences in their conceptions of intentional meaning. The

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crucial question for grasping the differences is *who* or *what* constitutes this meaning. For Husserl, the question of constitution is a complicated one, especially in light of later works in which sensibility and passivity play a more important role. In his earlier and more idealist works, however, this sense-giving is performed by the transcendental subject. Heidegger is more skeptical toward transcendental subjectivity because it does not account for the subject's finitude and seeks to understand intentionality differently. For Heidegger intentional meaning is found in the ontological structures as such; he believes there to be too much left of the representational approach in Husserl and wants to conceive of meaning or intentionality as something more independent from the constitutive subject. The question of meaning is nevertheless of crucial importance for Heidegger, too; he insists on the necessity of re-posing the old question of the meaning of Being – *Sinn des Seins*, as he puts it in the first pages of *Sein und Zeit.* The question of the meaning of Being is for Heidegger the fundamental question for all ontology (SZ 231), but it is a well-known fact that Heidegger never really came to answer the question of the meaning of Being *in itself* in the analyses of *Sein und Zeit*, and later gave up the whole ambition completely. In *Sein und Zeit*, which is most important for Levinas' reading, Heidegger spent his energy on explicating what could be approached with less difficulty, namely, the meaning of *Dasein.* Dasein is for Heidegger a being that relates to its own Being or existence in its temporal, finite conditions (Hei: SZ §1 – 5). The meaning of Being becomes for him inseparable from the comprehension of Being, but this comprehension can only be achieved by confronting one's own finitude, which ultimately means one's own death and the structure of *concern.*

We here see that the phenomenological questions of *Sinngebung* and *Sinn des Seins* rely on what we here may distinguish as a transcendental and an ontological phenomenology, respectively. When Levinas poses the question of the meaning of the ethical, he seeks to go beyond both Husserl's and Heidegger's conceptions of meaning. Let us therefore first see why Levinas believes these notions to be incapable or insufficient for grasping the meaning of the ethical. As Derrida demonstrated in his famous essay "Violence et métaphysique," Levinas' critique of phenomenology in *Totalité et Infini* targets what he sees as transcendental violence in Husserl on the one hand, and ontological violence in Heidegger on the other. For Levinas neither of the accounts capture the meaning of the Other as Other, but rather reduce the Other to what he calls the same, either through the transcendental violence of a strong sense-giving subject or through the ontological violence of an impersonal Being (Derrida 1967). As we shall see later, Derrida objects to what he sees as Levinas' futile attempt to avoid violence, claiming that such avoidance necessarily creates even greater violence. This critique will lead Levinas deeper into methodological reflections in *Otherwise than being or beyond essence.* Nevertheless, Levinas there continues to seek an alternative

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approach to ethical meaning beyond both Husserl's *Sinngebung* and Heidegger's *Sinn des Seins*.

At the same time, the ethical meaning that Levinas proposes is difficult to grasp if we do not relate it to the phenomenological frameworks of Husserl and Heidegger. When Levinas claims that the meaning of the ethical does not come from the self but from the Other, this could be contrasted to Husserl's notion of *Sinngebung*. The ethical Other is for Levinas rather an instance that puts these sense-giving powers in question – and hence questions intentionality. John Drabinski claimed that the structure of sense-giving remains for Levinas in a so-called "ethical Sinngebung," but that the intentional move is inversed so that it is something exterior that bestows meaning and not something interior (Drabinski 2001, 85). Levinas himself refers to a meaning prior to my "Sinngebung" (TI 44), but also develops the notion of an Other-centered meaning-bestowal as a "reversal of intentionality" (AE 80).

Heidegger's question of the meaning of Being is also important as a reference point for Levinas' alternative notion of meaning. Levinas early on recognized Heidegger's urge to pose the question of being as being anew (OE 56), but he ends up questioning the whole idea of ontology as fundamental. In *Totalité et Infini*, Levinas' main problem with Heidegger's claim that this question of the meaning of Being is fundamental, is that Being – as opposed to beings – is impersonal, thereby allegedly hindering the responsibility involved in the more fundamental relationship to the Other (TI 36). While such an opposition between the impersonal being and the personal Other is not always strictly maintained by Levinas, it nevertheless points to the fundamental critique that Levinas raised against Heidegger, namely, that his thinking remains in a realm of irresponsibility. The meaning of the ethical can for Levinas not be found through an analysis of the meaning of Being, but precisely in departing from it, thereby still depending on Heidegger's framework. This is particularly visible in an article from 1964, in which Levinas specifically discusses the notion(s) of meaning: "La signification et le sens."[1]

1 When discussing the phenomenological notion of meaning, one is immediately confronted with a translation problem, since the German texts uses different words "Sinn," "Bedeutung" and "Meinung." As Drabinski showed in his discussion of the different modalities of meaningfulness, the word "Sinn" (which Levinas translates as *sens*) has the broadest and most generative meaning, whereas "Bedeutung" (which he translates as *signification*) has a more restricted meaning, belonging to the economy of manifestation and derivative of "Sinn." When Levinas talks of *sens de l'éthique,* the word *sens* thus takes on a broader meaning than *signification* (Drabinski 2001, 25 – 28). It would perhaps be natural to render *sens de l'éthique* as "sense of the ethical," but as we shall see, e. g., in "Notes sur le sens" the question of meaning of the ethical also implies an existential dimension. I have mostly chosen to leave the technical question of translation aside and translate *sens* as "meaning," albeit acknowledging that the word has many dimensions.

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Ethical meaning as an epiphany of the face

In the article "La signification et le sens," Levinas understands the unique ethical meaning in contrast to significations in general. He starts by analyzing the fundamental *contextuality* of significations in general, and seems to rely on Heidegger's account when he describes experience as hermeneutical and not intuitive: "L'expérience est une lecture, la compréhension du sens, une exégèse, une herméneutique et non pas une intuition." Furthermore, what is comprehended or given meaning cannot be given outside of language and the world: "*Ceci en tant que cela,* – la signification n'est pas une modification apportée à un contenu existant en dehors de tout langage. Tout demeure dans un langage ou dans un monde […]" (SS 128 – 129). In determining *this as that*, the meaning of words is dependent on other words, and the meaning of language is dependent on the position of who is speaking (SS 127). In short; significations are interconnected and arise in reference to each other (SS 128). What Levinas here does is to outline (and recognize) that things signify against the background of a *horizon.*

In *Sein und Zeit*, too, the meaning of Being is inseparable from the comprehension of Being, and the notion of horizon is essential to this comprehension. The problem with this conception, as Levinas expresses it in this article, is that it lacks an *orientation* of meaning.[2] For Levinas, this deficit may be seen as a modern expression of atheism; "cette multivocité du sens de l'être – cette essentielle désorientation – est peut-être, l'expression moderne de l'athéisme" (SS 135). This does not, however, mean that he calls for a fundamental theology to structure all other experience, but rather he still aims at a unique meaning (*sens*) capable of orientation that is distinguished from culturally conditioned meaning (*significations*): "Ne faut-il pas, dès lors, distinguer, d'une part, les significations, dans leur pluralisme culturel et, d'autre part, le sens, orientation et unité de l'être, événement primordial où viennent se placer toutes les autres démarches de la pensée et toute la vie historique de l'être?" (SS 138).

For Levinas this unique and primordial meaning capable of orientation may be found in the Other, in *Autrui,* that affects me from the outside: "Autrui qui me fait face n'est pas inclus dans la totalité de l'être exprimé." The Other is thus seen to orient and unite being, while itself escaping its totality. This Other is thus neither a cultural signification nor a simple given, "Il est *sens*

2 The concept of orientation is crucial to Levinas' important source of inspiration, Franz Rosenzweig. Yet, whereas many have remarked how Rosenzweig's revelation is anchored in the particularity of the Jewish, we shall see that Levinas' religious considerations do not admit any privileged place to Judaism as a manifest religion for this orientation. The determination of meaning for Levinas cannot be found in "cette religion que la personne demanderait pour soi." The relationship between God and meaning must rather be thought of the other way around: "c'est l'analyse du sens qui doit livrer la notion de Dieu que le sens recèle" (SS 139).

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primordialement" (SS 144). This way of understanding the ethical meaning as orienting other significations reflects Levinas' view that ethics, and not ontology, is "first philosophy." The ethical meaning reverses what he sees as an imperialistic tendency inherent to ontology to include everything foreign or Other into the same.

Although the meaning that emerges from the Other for Levinas is primordial, it is not transcendental; rather, it signifies in *unicity.* But is it really possible for the Other to signify if not *as* something? Levinas approaches this question by claiming that the Other signifies in two ways: as the manifestation of a phenomenon on the one hand and as the epiphany of the face on the other. The *manifestation* of the Other relies on a (Heideggerian) hermeneutical approach, where the Other signifies in reference to its context; "La manifestation d'Autrui se produit, certes, de prime abord, conformément à la façon dont toute signification se produit. Autrui est présent dans un ensemble culturel et s'éclaire par cet ensemble, comme un texte par son contexte […] La compréhension d'Autrui est, ainsi, une herméneutique, une exégèse" (SS 144). This manifestation of the Other, in other words, does require a hermeneutics of the Other. But then the Other also signifies in another way: unmediated, by itself, as *epiphany*; "Mais l'épiphanie d'Autrui comporte une signifiance propre, indépendante de cette signification reçue du monde. Autrui ne nous vient pas seulement à partir du contexte, mais, sans cette médiation, signifie par lui-même" (SS 144). This lack of context and mediation of the Other is crucial to how Levinas here and elsewhere describes the *face.* The face signifies, beyond world, beyond horizon and beyond context, as an arrival "qui *derange* l'immanence sans se fixer dans les horizons du Monde" (SS 151). The primordial ethical meaning is thereby found in the Other as *face* – signifying in itself, but in a way that disturbs immanence without depending on it.

Also in the analysis of *Totalité et Infini*, written a few years earlier, the face is seen as the place for the epiphany of transcendence, breaking with our common world (TI 211). Although Levinas sometimes (as below) uses the word manifestation when he talks about how the face signifies, he refuses to approach the face hermeneutically: "Se manifester comme visage, c'est *s'imposer* par-delà la forme […] sans intermédiaire d'aucune image dans sa nudité, c'est-à-dire dans sa misère et dans sa faim" (TI 218). What is interesting about this and other similar passages for our question about ethical meaning, however, is that Levinas claims the face signifies in nudity, beyond form and image. But does not this emphasis on the nudity of the face as poverty and hunger reveal another, *ethical* context – despite the rejection of contextuality and horizon? To answer this question, it is useful to go back to an early analysis of face vs. form that Levinas presented already in the work *De l'existence à l'existant* in 1947.

The difference between face and form reflects the distinction between epiphany and manifestation, though the analysis of form is interesting because

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