

# IS ONTOLOGY FUNDAMENTAL?\*

Emmanuel Levinas

Does not the primacy of ontology among the disciplines of knowledge rest on the most luminous evidence? Does not all knowledge of relations wherein beings are opposed or reconnected to one another already involve the comprehension of the fact that these relations and these beings exist? To articulate the significance of this fact, to take up once more the problem of ontology (implicitly resolved by everyone, be it only under the form of forgetfulness), is to establish a fundamental knowing, it seems, without which all philosophical, scientific, or common knowledge remains naive.

## Contemporary Ontology

The dignity of contemporary ontological research derives from the imperious and original character of this evidence. Through it, thinkers are immediately elevated above the "illuminations" of literary coteries in order to breath afresh the air of the great dialogues of Plato and the metaphysics of Aristotle. To place in question this fundamental evidence is a daring undertaking. But to approach philosophy by such questioning is, at least, to return to its source, beyond literature and its problems of pathos.

The recovery of ontology by contemporary philosophy is exceptional in that the knowledge of being in general—fundamental ontology—presupposes the *factual situation* of the mind which knows. A reason liberated from temporal contingencies, a soul co-eternal with the Ideas, such is the self-image projected by a reason which has forgotten itself or is unaware of itself, a reason which is naive. Ontology, consider authentic, coincides with the facticity of temporal existence. To comprehend being as being is to exist here below. Not that the *here below*, by the trials which it imposes, elevates and purifies the soul, enabling it to acquire a receptivity in regard to being. Not that the here below opens a history, the progress of which alone would make thinkable the idea of being. The *here below* gets its ontological privilege neither from the ascesis which it demands, nor from the civilization to which it gives rise. Already in these temporal cares the comprehension of being is spelled out. Ontology is not accomplished in the triumph of human beings over their condition, but in the very tension whereby this condition is assumed.

This possibility of conceiving contingency and facticity, not as facts

\* Translated by Peter Atterton. This essay was first published in French under the title "L'Ontologie est-elle fondamentale?" in *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 56 (1951): 88-98. Our thanks to the editors of *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* for their permission to publish this translation.

open to intellection, but as the act of intellection, this possibility of making visible in the brutality of given contents and facts the transitivity of comprehending and a “signifying intention”—a possibility discovered by Husserl, but united by Heidegger with the intellection of being in general—constitutes the great novelty of contemporary ontology. From now on the comprehension of being does not presuppose a merely theoretical attitude, but the whole of human comportment. The whole of humanity is ontology. An individual’s scientific work, his or her affective life, the satisfaction of his or her needs and labour, his or her social life and death—all these moments articulate, with a rigour which reserves to each a determinate function, the comprehension of being or truth. Our entire civilization follows from this comprehension, be it only in forgetfulness of being. It is not because there is humanity that there is truth. It is because there is truth, because being is found to be inseparable from its appearing [*apérîté*], or, if one likes, because being is intelligible, that there is humanity.

#### **The Ambiguity of Contemporary Ontology**

The return to the original themes of philosophy—and it is in this that the work of Heidegger remains striking still—does not proceed from a pious decision to return finally to who knows what *philosophia perennis*, but from a radical attention given over to the pressing preoccupations of the moment. The abstract question of the meaning of being as such and the questions of the present hour spontaneously rejoin one another.

The identification of the comprehension of being with the plenitude of concrete existence risks from the outset drowning ontology in existence. This *philosophy of existence* which Heidegger for his part refuses, is only the counterpart, however inevitable, of his own conception of ontology. That which is of interest to the philosopher in so far as it is ontology—namely, historical existence—is of interest in literature because it is dramatic. When philosophy and life are intermingled, we no longer know if we look to philosophy because it is life, or if we cling to life because it is philosophy.

The essential contribution of the new ontology can be seen in its opposition to classical intellectualism. To comprehend the tool is not to look at it, but to know how to handle it. To comprehend our situation in reality is not to define it, but to find ourselves in an affective disposition. To comprehend being is to exist. All this indicates, it would seem, a rupture with the theoretical structure of Western thought. To think is no longer to contemplate, but to commit oneself. It is to be engulfed by that which one thinks, to be involved. This is the dramatic event of being in the world.

The comedy begins with the simplest of our movements, carrying with them every inevitable awkwardness. In putting out my hand to approach a chair, I have creased the sleeve of my jacket, I have scratched the floor, I have dropped the ash from my cigarette. In doing that which I wanted to do, I have done so many things that I did not want to do. The act has not been pure for I have left some traces. In wiping out these traces, I have left others. Sherlock Holmes will

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apply his science to this irreducible coarseness of each of my initiatives, whereby the comedy can well turn tragic. When the awkwardness of the act turns against the goal pursued, we are at the height of tragedy. Laius, in order to outmaneuver the predictions of disaster, will undertake precisely that which is necessary for them to be accomplished. To the extent that Oedipus succeeds, he works for his downfall, like the prey that flees the direct line of fire of the hunters across a field covered in snow, and thus leaves the very traces that will be its loss.

We are thus responsible beyond our intentions. It is impossible for the regard behind the act to disregard the inadvertent consequences following from the act. We always have one finger caught in the machine and things turn against us. In other words, our consciousness, and therefore our mastery of reality, do not exhaust our relation with reality, in which we are always present in all the gravity of our being. Or, again, consciousness of reality does not coincide with our habitation in the world. It is this thesis in the philosophy of Heidegger that has produced such a strong impression on the literary world.

And yet the philosophy of existence is immediately effaced by ontology. This fact of being involved, this event in which I find myself engaged, tied as I am to that which ought to be my object by ties not reducible to thoughts, this existence is interpreted as comprehension. From now on the transitive character of the verb to know [*connaître*] is attached to the verb to exist.<sup>1</sup> The first sentence in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*: "All men by nature aspire to

knowledge" remains true for a philosophy that has been taken too lightly as disdainful of the intellect. Ontology does not come merely to crown our practical concerns with being, as the contemplation of essences in Book X of the *Nicomachean Ethics* crowns the virtues. Ontology is the essence of every relation with beings and moreover of every relation in being. Does not the fact that a being is "open" belong to the very fact of its being? Hence our concrete existence is interpreted as a function of its entry into the "openness" of being in general. We exist in a circuit of understanding with reality. Understanding is the very event that existence articulates. All non-comprehension is only a deficient mode of comprehension. *In fine*, it turns out that the analysis of existence and of what is called its *thisness* (*Da*) is nothing but the description of the essence of truth, the condition of the very understanding of being.

#### The Other as Interlocutor

It is not on behalf of a divorce between philosophy and reason that we hold to a judicious language. All the same we are entitled to ask whether reason, presented as the possibility of such a language, does in fact necessarily precede it, or if language is not rather founded on a relation anterior to comprehension and constituting reason? The pages that follow will attempt to characterize in a very general way this relation which is irreducible to comprehension, even to that comprehension beyond classical intellectualism described by Heidegger.

1. Cf. our remarks on this subject in Jean Wahl's *A Short History of Existentialism*, trans. F. Williams and S. Maron (New York: Philosophical Library, 1949), pp. 47-53.

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Comprehension for Heidegger ultimately rests on the *opening* of being. Whereas Berkeleyan idealism, through the qualitative contents of being, saw in the latter a reference to thought, Heidegger, in some formal manner, sees in the fact that a being is at all—in its work of being and its very independence—its intelligibility. This does not involve a prior dependence upon a subjective thought; rather it is like a vacancy awaiting its incumbent, opened by the very fact that a being is. It is thus that Heidegger describes in their most formal structure, the articulations of vision where the relation of the subject with the object is subordinated to the relation of the object with light, which is not an object. The understanding of a being will thus consist in going beyond the being, into the *openness*, and in perceiving it *within the horizon of being*. In other words, comprehension, as construed by Heidegger, rejoins the great tradition of Western philosophy wherein to comprehend the particular being is already to place oneself beyond the particular. It is to relate to the particular, which alone exists, by knowledge which is always knowledge of the universal.

One cannot oppose personal preference to the venerable tradition that Heidegger continues. One cannot *prefer* as the condition of ontology a relation with a being over the fundamental thesis that every relation with a being presupposes the nearness or the forgetfulness of being. From the moment that one engages in reflection, and precisely for the reasons which since Plato have subordinated the sensation of the particular to knowledge of the universal, one is reduced, it would seem, to subordinating relations between

beings to structures of being, metaphysics to ontology, the existentiell to the existential. How, moreover, can the *relation* with a *being* be, at the beginning, anything other than its *comprehension* as a being, the fact of freely letting it be inasmuch as it is a being?

It cannot—unless this being is the Other [*autrui*]. Our relation with the Other certainly consists in wanting to comprehend him or her. But this relation goes beyond comprehension. This is not merely because knowledge of the Other requires, outside of all curiosity, also sympathy or love, which are ways of being distinct from impassive contemplation. Rather it is because in our relation with the Other, he or she does not affect us in terms of a concept. The Other is a being and counts as such.

Here the adherent of ontology is likely to object as follows. To speak of a *being*, is this not already to insinuate that a being concerns us from the point of view of a revelation of being and is therefore, since placed in the opening of being, from the very outset established in the heart of comprehension? What can the independence of the being mean, in effect, if not in reference to ontology? To relate oneself to a being inasmuch as it is a being, means for Heidegger to let the being be, to comprehend it as independent of the perception which discovers and grasps it. It is precisely through such comprehension that it gives itself as a being and not only as an object. Being with the Other—*Miteinandersein*—thus rests for Heidegger on the ontological relation.

Our response is to ask whether the relation with the Other is in fact a matter of *letting be*? Is not the independence of

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the Other accomplished in the role of being called? Is the person to whom one speaks understood from the first in his or her being? Not at all. The Other is not an object of comprehension first and an interlocutor second. The two relations are intertwined. In other words, the comprehension of the Other is inseparable from his or her invocation.

To comprehend a person is already to have spoken with him or her. To posit the existence of the Other through letting be is already to have accepted this existence, to have taken account of it. "To have accepted," "to have taken account," do not refer to comprehension and letting be. Speech delineates an original relation. Here it is a question of perceiving the function of language not as subordinate to the *consciousness* that one has of the presence of the Other, his or her nearness, or our community with him or her, but rather as the condition of any such "consciousness."

Of course, it is still necessary to show why the event of language is no longer situated at the level of comprehension. Why not in effect broaden the notion of comprehension according to a procedure familiar from phenomenology? Why not present the invocation of the Other as the characteristic proper to his or her comprehension?

This seems to us to be impossible. Take for example the comprehension of everyday objects, which are interpreted according to our mode of handling them. Even here the broadening of the notion of knowledge is justified by going beyond known objects. It is accomplished in spite of everything there may be of pre-theoretical engagement in the handling of "equipment." At the heart of the latter, a

being is *gone beyond* in the very movement that grasps it. We see in this "beyond" necessary to presence "at hand" the very itinerary of comprehension. This going beyond is not only accomplished in the preliminary appearance of the "world" each time that we concern ourselves with something manipulable, as Heidegger argues. It is delineated also in the *possession* and in the *use* of the object. Such is not the case, however, when it is a matter of my relation with the Other. Here also, if one likes, I comprehend the being of the Other, beyond his or her particularity as a being. The person with whom I am in relation I call being. But in so calling him or her, I call to him or to her. I am not only thinking that the Other is, I am speaking to the Other. He or she is my *partner* in the heart of a relation which ought only have made him or her present to me. I have spoken to the Other, that is to say, I have neglected the universal being that the Other incarnates in order to remain with the particular being he or she is. Here the formulation "before being in relation with a being, I must first have comprehended it as being" loses its strict application, for in comprehending being, I simultaneously tell this comprehension to this being.

A human being is the sole being which I am unable to encounter without expressing this very encounter to him. It is precisely thus that this encounter distinguishes itself from knowledge. In every attitude in regard to the human there is the salutation, if only in the refusal of the latter. Here perception is not projected towards an horizon, which as the field of my liberty, power, and property presents itself as the familiar

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basis upon which to grasp the individual. It refers to the pure individual, to a being as such and signifies precisely, if one wishes to speak in terms of "comprehension," that my comprehension of this being as such is already the expression that I offer him or her of this very comprehension.

This impossibility of encountering the Other without speaking to him or her signifies that in this instance thought is inseparable from expression. But such expression does not consist in decanting in some manner a thought in connection with the Other into the mind of the Other. We know this not from Heidegger, but from Socrates. Nor does such expression consist in *articulating* the comprehension that I and the Other henceforth share. It consists in the institution of sociality by a relation prior to every participation in a common content by comprehension, and is thus irreducible to comprehension.

The relation with the Other is not therefore ontology. This tie to the Other, which does not reduce itself to the representation of the Other, but rather to his or her invocation, where the invocation is not preceded by comprehension, we call *religion*. The essence of discourse is prayer. What distinguishes thought aiming at an object from the tie with a person is that the latter is articulated in the vocative—the one who is named is at the same time the one who is called.

In choosing the term religion—without having pronounced the word God or the word *sacred*—we have initially in mind the meaning which Auguste Comte gives to this term in his *Politique Positive*. Nothing theological, nothing mystical lies hidden behind the analysis that we have

just given of the encounter with the Other, an encounter whose formal structure it was important to underline; namely, that its object is at one and the same time given to us and *in society* with us, without this event of sociality being able to reduce itself to an ordinary property revealed in the given, without knowledge being able to take precedence over sociality. If the word religion is taken to imply, however, that the Infinite is rejoined through human faces, or that the relation with human beings, which, separated from the exercise of power, is irreducible to comprehension, then it has an ethical resonance all of whose Kantian echoes we accept.

Religion is the relation with a being as a being. It does not consist in *conceiving* it as such, which would be an act where the *being* is already assimilated, even if this assimilation were to succeed in disengaging it as a *being*, in *letting it be*. Nor does religion consist in establishing who knows what *belongingness*, nor in running up against the irrational in the effort to comprehend a *being*. Is the rational reducible to power over an object? Is reason domination where the resistance of a being as such is surmounted, not in an appeal to this very resistance, but as a ruse of the hunter who ensnares all that a being contains of strength and irreducibility on the basis of its weaknesses, its abdications of particularity, its place in the horizon of the universal? Does understanding as ruse, understanding belonging to struggle and violence over things, extend to the constitution of the human order? Are we not accustomed, albeit paradoxically, to seeking in struggle the very manifestation of spirit and its reality? Is not the order

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of reason constituted rather in a situation where "one chats," where the resistance of a being as a being is not broken, but pacified?

The concern of contemporary philosophy to liberate human beings from categories adapted uniquely for things cannot therefore content itself with opposing notions of the static, the inert, the determined, to those of dynamism, transcendence, or freedom as description of our essence. To say what human nature is, is not so much a matter of opposing one essence to another. Before all else it is a matter of finding a place wherein human beings cease to concern us in terms of the horizon of being, a place wherein they cease to offer themselves to our powers. A being as such (and not an incarnation of universal being) can be only in a relation where such a being is spoken to. This being is the human being accessible as a neighbor. That is to say, accessible as a face.

#### **The Ethical Signification of the Other**

In relating to a being in the opening of being, comprehension locates a signification on the basis of being. In this sense, it does not invoke a being, but only names it, thus accomplishing a violence and a negation; a partial negation which is violence. This *partiality* is indicated by the fact that, without disappearing, this being finds itself in my power. Partial negation, which is violence, denies the independence of this being; it belongs to me. Possession is the mode whereby a being, while fully in existence, is partially negated. It is not a question simply of the fact that the being is an instrument or a tool, that is to say, a means. It is an end

also; both consumable and enjoyable, the latter is nourishment and offers itself, gives itself, belongs to me. To be sure, vision measures my power over the object, but it is already enjoyment. The encounter with the Other consists in the fact that despite the spread of my domination over him or her resulting in slavery, I do not possess him or her. The Other does not enter entirely into the opening of being where I already stand, as in the field of my freedom. It is not on the basis of being in general that the Other comes to meet me. Everything which comes to me on the basis of being in general, of course, offers itself to my comprehension and possession. In such a case I understand the Other on the basis of his or her history, surroundings, habits. That which escapes comprehension as regards the Other is precisely the being that he or she is. I cannot negate the Other partially, in violence, in grasping him or her on the basis of being in general and in possession. The Other is the sole being in which negation can only announce itself as total: *murder*. The Other is the sole being I can wish to kill.

I can wish. And yet this ability is quite the contrary of power. The triumph of this power is its defeat as power. At the very moment when my power to kill realizes itself, the Other has escaped me. I can of course in killing *attain* my goal, I can kill as I hunt animals, or fell trees. But then I have grasped the Other in the opening of being in general, as an element in the world where I stand, where he or she is perceived *on the horizon*. In such a case I have not looked the Other in the face, I have not encountered his or her face. The temptation of total negation, measuring the infinity of the attempt and

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its impossibility, is the presence of the face. To be in relation with the Other face to face is to be unable to kill. It is also the situation of discourse.

To the extent that things are only things, our relation with them is established only as comprehension. As beings, they allow themselves to astonish on the basis of being and the totality that lends them their meaning. The immediate is not an object of comprehension. An immediate given of consciousness is a contradiction in terms. To be given is to be exposed to the ruse of the understanding, to be caught up in the mediation of a concept and the light of being in general, but a detour, "in a roundabout way." To be given is to signify on the basis of that which one is not. By contrast, speech, or the relation with the face, the event of collectivity, is a relation with a being itself, as a pure being.

That the relation with a *being* is the invocation of a face and already speech, a relation with a depth rather than with an horizon, a breach in the horizon in fact, that my neighbor is the being *par excellence*, can indeed appear somewhat surprising when one is accustomed to the conception of a being, by itself insignificant, silhouetted against a luminous horizon and acquiring a meaning only in virtue of its presence within this horizon. The face *signifies* otherwise. In it the infinite resistance of a being to our power affirms itself precisely against the murderous will that it defies. And this is because, completely naked—and the nakedness of the face is more than a figure of style—the face signifies of itself. We cannot even say that the face is an opening, for this would

be to make it relative to a surrounding plenitude.

Can things have a face? Is not art the activity that lends faces to things? Does not the facade of a house regard us? The analysis thus far does not suffice for an answer. We wonder all the same if the impersonal march of rhythm does not substitute itself in art, always fascinating and magical, for sociality, for the face, for speech.

To comprehension and signification grasped on the basis of some horizon, we oppose the signifyingness of the face. Will these brief indications by which we have introduced this notion allow us to catch sight of its role in comprehension itself and all the conditions which delineate a sphere of relations barely suspected? That to which we are alluding here seems to us suggested by the practical philosophy of Kant, to which we feel particularly close.

In what way the vision of the face is no longer vision but audition and speech, how the encounter with the face—that is, conscience—can be described as the condition of consciousness *tout court* and of disclosure, how consciousness is affirmed as the impossibility of killing, what the conditions of the appearance of the face as the temptation and the impossibility of murder are, how I can appear to myself as a face, and finally, in what manner the relation with the Other or the collectivity is our actual relation, irreducible to comprehension, with the infinite—these are the themes that issue from this first contestation of the primacy of ontology. Philosophical research cannot in any case content itself with a mere reflection on the self or on existence. Such reflection offers only the

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story of a personal adventure, of a private soul, returning incessantly to itself, even when it seems to flee itself. The human

only presents itself to a relation that is not a power.

Paris, France

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