Debating Levinas' Legacy

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Metaphysics in Phenomenology: Levinas and the ‘Theological Turn’

Eddo Evink

During the second half of the 20th century the phenomenological tradition has given way to a wide variety of ideas, questions, styles and oeuvres. The phenomenological movement has never been a strictly defined school of thoughts, but since the last decades it has become almost impossible to set down a clear demarcation of it. One of the striking developments is the moving away from the perhaps most famous slogan of Husserlian phenomenology: ‘to the things themselves!’ Many phenomenological thinkers, especially in France, pay more attention to the giving of phenomena and to what is beyond the apparent than to the phenomena themselves.

Dominique Janicaud has given a profound critique of this development in his *The Theological Turn in French Phenomenology*, with critical readings of Levinas, Marion, Chrétien and Henry.¹ According to Janicaud these philosophers have given phenomenology a theological turn by leaving aside the phenomenological method and by turning towards the ‘unapparent’, which often happens to have a theological character. His first target is the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. Among other things, Janicaud accuses Levinas of imposing from the start a dichotomy of the Self and the Other on all phenomenological analyses. Unfortunately his reading of Levinas is rather poor and in several respects simply wrong.² Nevertheless, the point Janicaud is hinting at deserves

1 Dominique Janicaud, *Le tournant théologique de la phénoménologie française* (Combas, 1991); Dominique Janicaud, “The Theological Turn of French Phenomenology,” trans. Bernard G. Prusak, in *Phenomenology and the “Theological Turn.” The French Debate*, ed. Dominique Janicaud (New York, 2000), pp. 16–103.

2 Janicaud states that Levinas takes his point of departure in a dichotomy between on the one hand, a metaphysics of alterity and infinity, and on the other hand, the enclosing and reducing strategies of knowledge, ontology, totality, representation and intentionality. Phenomenology falls on the latter side and has been rejected by Levinas as an objectifying method. Levinas, therefore, is supposed to have misunderstood intentionality and to have rejected the phenomenological method from the start. However, a short look at Levinas’ introductions to the phenomenology of Husserl can already demonstrate that Levinas’ interpretation of Husserlian intentionality is quite to the point and does not show the misunderstanding Janicaud finds here: cf. Janicaud, *Le tournant théologique*, pp. 27–29; Janicaud, “The Theological Turn,” pp. 36–39; Emmanuel Levinas, *La théorie de l’intuition dans la phénoménologie de Husserl* (Paris, 1930), pp. 74–75; Emmanuel Levinas, “L’œuvre d’Edmund Husserl,”

a thorough investigation, for one can still wonder where this ‘theological turn’ comes from, and also whether Levinas is still faithful to what may be called the phenomenological method.

In this article I will first raise the question whether the so called ‘theological turn’ is indeed caused by a pre-phenomenological separation between self and other. Through a reading of an early text of Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, I will show that another separation precedes that between self and other. Then the phenomenological descriptions given by Levinas, and their methodological justifications, will be critically examined. Finally a few alternatives will briefly be sketched.

1 Levinas’ Existential Phenomenology: Being and Being Human

Although Levinas is most well known for his idea of the ethical relationship with the other, this idea has been elaborated in a relatively late phase of his philosophical development. The dichotomy of the Self and the Other is preceded by another separation, between existence and the existent. In his first short articles and texts, published in the 1930s and 40s, Levinas unfolds an existential phenomenology in which several ideas of Husserl and Heidegger are combined in a way that calls Sartre to mind. Whereas Sartre merges a Heideggerian existential human being with a consciousness that is characterized by a Husserlian and even Cartesian transparency, Levinas puts together Heidegger’s existential analyses of the human *Dasein* with Husserl’s idea of a free and transcendental consciousness that constitutes all its phenomena within its own subjective world. Levinas also shares with Sartre a very negative and pessimistic view of being as meaningless, repellent and even horrifying. The human being needs to escape an existence that thrusts its meaninglessness upon him in experiences like, indeed, nausea.³ Levinas’ view of the relation between human beings and Being in general, however, is quite different from both Sartre and Heidegger.

in *En découvrant l’existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*, 2nd ed. (Paris, 1988), pp. 7–52, 22–24, 39; Emmanuel Levinas, “Réflexions sur la ‘technique’ phénoménologique,” *ibid.*, pp. 111–112.

3 Emmanuel Levinas, *De l’évasion*, 2nd ed. (Paris, 1982), pp. 67–99. It is not easy to tell who influenced whom. It was Levinas who introduced phenomenology in France, and Sartre got to know the work of Husserl and Heidegger through Levinas. But Levinas develops most of his own phenomenology in the late 1940s and afterwards, after the first publications of Sartre, and Levinas clearly reacts in these texts to the work of Sartre.

In order to show how Levinas develops his existential phenomenology, especially regarding the separation between being and the existent, I will mainly follow his argumentation in *Existence and Existents*, with additional references to other texts like *Time and the other* and *Totality and Infinity*.

The relation of the human being to its own being is the central issue of *Existence and Existents*. Levinas wants to demonstrate how the existent, the subject, realizes its own being as a 'continual birth', by taking possession of himself.⁴ This 'taking up its own existence' can only be described through analyses of phenomena that precede reflection. In order to reach this pre-reflective domain, Levinas analyzes moods like weariness and indolence in a phenomenological style, in a manner that is analogous to Heidegger's investigations of fear and boredom. The weariness or fatigue Levinas is interested in, is not a tiredness relating to specific objects or situations, it is a fatigue with regard to existence itself:

There exists a weariness which is a weariness of everything and everyone, and above all a weariness of oneself. What wearies then is not a particular form of our life—our surroundings, because they are dull and ordinary, our circle of friends, because they are vulgar and cruel; the weariness concerns existence itself. [...] In weariness we want to escape existence itself. [...] [T]he movement we see in weariness by which an existent takes up its existence in the hesitation of a refusal, a movement which thus expresses the peculiar relationship one has with existence—birth as a relationship [...].⁵

Levinas also describes laziness or indolence as an intentional relation to existence as such. In this weariness and indolence existence is shown to be a burden the existent has to bear, or, in other words, existence is an act that has to be carried out here and now. All our efforts and actions do not only have a meaning within the world, they are also a way in which we take our existence upon us. Exactly in their retardation and hesitancy of the performance of existence, fatigue and indolence can make us aware of existence as an act to accomplish.

4 I use the masculine pronoun, not only because Levinas does so, but also because his use of the masculine pronouns and perspective has far-reaching consequences in his phenomenology of the erotic relationship.

5 Emmanuel Levinas, *De l'existence à l'existant*, 2nd ed. (Paris, 1963), pp. 31–32; Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague, 1978), pp. 24–25.

The phenomena of fatigue and indolence share an important feature: they are “moments of a limit,”⁶ in which the meaningful relations of the world are being interrupted. These phenomena contain a ‘relation’ with being that precedes the world and that therefore, according to Levinas, cannot really be called a ‘relation’. The networks of references that build up our world are constitutive for the meaning of objects. In the light of the world the phenomena can find their own place and thus receive their meaning. The intentionality of consciousness is the origin of this meaningfulness of the objects within the world.⁷ Later, in *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas will refer to this ‘giving of meaning’ with the Husserlian term *Sinngebung*.⁸ This meaning is almost lost, is loosing itself, in the ‘limit-moments’ of weariness and laziness.

The worldly relations also give meaning to the appearance of what is not completely reducible to its context. Other human beings appear to us as meaningful thanks to the forms of their clothes and culturally shaped etiquette that hide their radical alterity, their nakedness. Love is the relation to the naked other; it transcends the desire for accessible objects.⁹ It reaches beyond the closed world whose binding relations can, after all, be dissolved—not only by the relation to the other, but also by poverty and starvation that can put the world upside down and tear the time out of joint.¹⁰

Light, knowledge, consciousness—they all constitute the world, they amount to the possibility of taking a distance, in the midst of being, from the raw and anonymous being that precedes the meaningful worldly connections. But we are able to disconnect, to extricate ourselves from the world. This can happen in the creation and interpretation of art that shows us the elemental, the exteriority of objects in their nakedness, without any form. Paintings and photography can take objects out of the world; colours can loosen themselves from their objects, and the rhythm of a poem can release its musicality from the meaning of the words. The elemental is exterior to the contextuality of the world, it shows the materiality of being beyond any form.

This being ‘in itself’, however, cannot be experienced. Works of art can give us, like fatigue and indolence, a border experience that offers a hint of being without a world. But being without world, existence without existents, can

6 Ibid., p. 26 / p. 21.

7 Ibid., pp. 71–80 / pp. 46–51.

8 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et infini. Essai sur l'extériorité* (The Hague, 1961), pp. 22, 68, 96, 182, 203, 239, 269–273; Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity. An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Adolpho Lingis (Pittsburgh, 1969), pp. 51, 95, 123, 207, 227, 261, 293–296.

9 Levinas, *De l'existence à l'existant*, pp. 60–68; Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, pp. 40–45.

10 Ibid., pp. 68–70 / pp. 44–45.

never appear as a phenomenon. For that reason, Levinas resorts to another method which he also borrows from his teacher Husserl: the thought experiment of the 'world-annihilation'. According to Husserl, if we think away the connections of the world, our consciousness remains as a central instance to which all the chaotic sensations appear.¹¹ Levinas slightly changes this experiment in an imagined lapse of all beings into nothingness. This lapse is in itself an event, according to Levinas, and, in addition, nothingness as such is not nothing, but an emptiness that, as such, happens. Consequently, in contrast with the idea of his teacher, Levinas states that it is not consciousness but anonymous being that remains:

Let us imagine all beings, things and persons, reverting into nothingness. One cannot put this return to nothingness outside of all events. But what of this nothingness itself? Something would happen, if only night and the silence of nothingness. The indeterminateness of this 'something is happening' is not the indeterminateness of a subject and does not refer to a substantive. [...] This impersonal, anonymous, yet inextinguishable 'consummation' of being, which murmurs in the depths of nothingness itself we shall designate by the term *there is*. The *there is*, inasmuch as it resists a personal form, is 'being in general'.¹²

This *il y a* is beyond any possible experience. Levinas compares it with the nameless and unidentifiable darkness of night that dissolves everything but is not nothingness:

We could say that the night is the very experience of the *there is*, if the term experience were not inapplicable to a situation which involves the total exclusion of light.¹³

In his description of the indeterminate nocturnal dark, Levinas again refers to literary evocations of undetermined material presences. In addition, he lends this anonymous night a specific quality: "The rustling of the *there is* . . . is horror."¹⁴ The touch of the *il y a* disrupts the meaningful coherence of the world and deprives consciousness of its subjectivity, which of course is a horrible

11 Edmund Husserl, *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie*, 1, 2nd ed. (Tübingen, 1980), § 49.

12 Levinas, *De l'existence à l'existant*, pp. 93–94; Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, p. 57.

13 Ibid., p. 94 / p. 58.

14 Ibid., p. 98 / p. 60.

experience. Worse than death, it is the spectral and meaningless continuity of being—comparable with Sartre's depiction of hell in *Huis clos*, that ends with "Continuons."¹⁵

But then it seems to be possible to have an experience of the *il y a* after all; at least that is what Levinas suggests in his description of insomnia, the useless and inevitable staying awake, where there is neither an object nor a subject, only the presence of meaningless being. "Horror is somehow a movement which will strip consciousness of its very 'subjectivity'. [...] Vigilance is quite devoid of objects."¹⁶ Can we have a consciousness of chaotic and anonymous being? If the *there is* is completely impersonal, there can be no personal subject that perceives it. The *il y a* is not only without object, it also overwhelms and subverts any subject. On the one hand, therefore, there is no consciousness of *il y a*:

We are, thus, introducing into the impersonal event of the *there is* not the notion of consciousness, but of wakefulness, in which consciousness participates, affirming itself as a consciousness because it only participates in it. [...] Wakefulness is anonymous. It is not that there is my vigilance in the night; in insomnia it is the night itself that watches. It watches.¹⁷

But still, as consciousness of insomnia, consciousness takes part in the *il y a*. It is part of the waking as a being overwhelmed by the 'there is'. As this consciousness of the wake, however, it is also already the movement out of the wake, the movement from impersonal vigilance to a personal reflection on it. In the experience of depersonalization, the subject is already on the way to finding itself again. Hence, on the other hand, there is, more or less, a consciousness of the *il y a*:

Consciousness is a part of wakefulness, which means that it has already torn into it. It contains a shelter from that being with which, depersonalized, we make contact in insomnia, ... [...] I am, one might say, the object rather than the subject of an anonymous thought. To be sure, I have at least the experience of being an object, I still become aware of this anonymous vigilance; but I become aware of it in a movement in which the

15 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Huis clos* (Paris, 1944). Levinas explicitly distinguishes the horror of nocturnal *il y a* from Heidegger's phenomenological analysis of fear; but despite his many references to French literature, he doesn't even mention Sartre.

16 Levinas, *De l'existence à l'existant*, pp. 98, 110; Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, pp. 60, 65.

17 Ibid., p. 111 / p. 66.

I is already detached from the anonymity, in which the limit situation of impersonal vigilance is reflected in the ebbing of a consciousness which abandons it.¹⁸

Insomnia, in short, is a border situation that can be perceived in several degrees, as a breaking apart of the substantial that brings about the disappearance of both objects and subject. Levinas even speaks of the possibility of an “impersonal ‘consciousness.’”¹⁹ Thus, insomnia is an experience in which the subject loses itself—and in which it also, as an experience of being lost, finds itself again. Levinas is mainly interested in the latter movement, which he interprets, like he did with regard to weariness and indolence, as a relation of the existent with being as such: the rise of the subject out of anonymous being.

The opposition between human being and the indeterminate ‘murmuring of being’ is the main antagonism in *Existence and Existents*. Both consciousness and unconsciousness *are* and, at the same time, are different from being, from the *il y a*. The subject, conscious or unconscious, awake or asleep, always takes a position, here and now. The presence of this position is a standstill in the indefinite ‘current of being’, a *hypostasis*.²⁰ Taking this position, every moment of presence again, is the ‘continual birth’ Levinas mentioned at the beginning of his text. Fatigue and indolence are interpreted by Levinas as a hesitation in relation to the bearing of existence here and now, a hesitation with regard to taking a position.²¹

The hypostasis, like the *il y a* itself, is not a phenomenon, nor can it be perceived. Nevertheless, Levinas makes it the cornerstone of his early phenomenological descriptions. The paradoxical relation between anonymous being and the personal being of the subject is the main opposition of his ontology. Human being can only be a human being by distancing himself from the impersonal *il y a*. This is why the presence and position of the hypostasis are so important to Levinas. They are aspects of the existence one has to bear, before there is a world in which our existence can find its context and meaning. Levinas makes this clear by opposing the position of the subject to the *Da* of Heidegger’s *Dasein*:

18 Ibid., pp. 111–112 / p. 66.

19 Ibid., p. 112 / p. 67.

20 Ibid., pp. 124–126 / pp. 72–73. The time of this hypostasis can be seen as a critical rearticulating of Husserl’s phenomenology of time-consciousness in an existential mode.

21 “Horror is somehow a movement which will strip consciousness of its very ‘subjectivity’. Not in lulling it into unconsciousness, but in throwing it into an *impersonal vigilance* . . .” Ibid., p. 98 / p. 60.

The *here* that belongs to consciousness, the place of its sleep and of its escape into itself, is radically different from the *Da* involved in Heidegger's *Dasein*. The latter already implies the world. The *here* we are starting with, the *here* of position, precedes every act of understanding, every horizon and all time. It is the very fact that consciousness is an origin, that it starts from itself, that it is an *existent*.²²

But if they are not brought forth by being, where do the hypostasis and the subject come from? Levinas' answer to this question is again paradoxical. In any case, the subject must be absolutely free and independent from the *il y a*; therefore it must have its origin either in itself or from outside of being. In the passage quoted above, he suggests that consciousness has its origin in itself. This suggestion comes back in Levinas' description of the instant of existence that has to bear itself every instant again:

An instant qua beginning and birth is a relationship *sui generis*, a relationship with and initiation into Being. One is first struck by the paradoxical nature of this relationship. What begins to be does not exist before having begun, and yet it is what does not exist that must through its beginning give birth to itself, come to itself, without coming from anywhere. Such is the paradoxical character of beginning which is constitutive of an instant.²³

In other passages Levinas speaks of a *creation ex nihilo*, where being created goes hand in hand with accepting its own creation:

Beginning, origin and birth present a dialectic in which this event in the heart of an instant becomes visible. For a being which has a beginning not only must a cause which creates it be found, but also what in it receives existence be explained. Not that birth would be the receiving of a deposit or gift by a pre-existing subject; even creation *ex nihilo* which implies pure passivity on the part of the creature, imposes on it, in the instant of its upsurge, the instant of creation, an act over its Being, a subject's mastery over its attribute. Beginning is already this possession and this activity of being.²⁴

22 Ibid., pp. 121–122 / p. 71.

23 Ibid., pp. 130–131 / p. 76.

24 Ibid., pp. 16–17 / p. 18.

In this way, the subject and the *il y a* at the same time belong together (because the subject *exists*) and are absolutely separated (because the subject exists only by distinguishing itself from the *there is*).²⁵ In this separation, the subject is completely bound to itself, and in this primeval relationship it is alone; it unavoidably has to fall back on itself in solitude:

The I always has one foot caught in its own existence. Outside in face of everything, it is inside of itself, tied to itself. It is forever bound up to the existence which it has taken up. This impossibility for the ego to not be a self constitutes the underlying tragic element in the ego, the fact that it is riveted to its own being. [...] ... freedom does not save me from the definitive character of my very existence, from the fact that I am forever stuck with myself. And this definitive element is my solitude.²⁶

In contrast to Heidegger's *Dasein*, the Levinasian subject is locked up in itself; the freedom of its openness toward the future is a secondary trait. The existent first relates to its own position and then it also has a world. This solitude haunts all the phenomenological explorations that Levinas has undertaken, all the studies of intentional relations in the world. On the basis of this pre-phenomenal position of the subject all phenomena are understood as appearing within the circular relation by which the subject is bound to itself. Thus, the position of the subject that precedes any phenomenological analysis, also dominates these analyses by rendering them their basic characteristics.

In conclusion, the human subject appears in Levinas' early existential phenomenology as a being that is, first of all, radically separated from the anonymous being in general, the *il y a*. In order to escape the meaninglessness of the *il y a*, the subject builds up a world with meaningful relations, in which it is then locked up. The separation between Self and Other, therefore, has its origin in another separation, between being and beings; it is preceded by Levinas' alternative exploration of the ontological difference.

In *Existence and Existents* Levinas already hints at the possibility of an escape from both meaninglessness and confinement. This escape has been described in another short work, written at the same time, *Time and the Other*. The subject can be released in the relation to the other human being who is radically

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 28–30 / p. 23.

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 143–144 / p. 84.

other. In *Time and the Other* this relation is not yet developed by Levinas as an ethical relation, but as a relation of love, *eros*, fertility and fatherhood.²⁷

2 The Separation Contested

2.1 *Phenomenology of the Unapparent*

But how convincing is this radical division between being and human being? Let us take a closer look at Levinas' phenomenological analyses and see if they are a 'phenomenology of the unapparent', as Janicaud states. What exactly is a phenomenology of the unapparent?

Already in a quite early phase of his philosophical development, Husserl showed how a phenomenon is always more than what is exactly perceived by the senses. We see an object, e.g. a tree, in several *Abschattungen* and from a certain angle. We can never completely see the tree as a whole. There is always a backside that does not show itself to our eyes. Nevertheless, we say that the tree appears to us, because it does, as a Gestalt: in one view the tree is there. The tree that appears to us is thus more than what literally appears for our senses. In other words, what appears to us is always more than what just appears; it includes something unapparent. This is part of the horizon, the world in which the phenomenon shows itself to us. Therefore, there is already something imperceptible in a direct perception of a tree.²⁸

If we go a step further, we can notice phenomena that do not directly appear to our senses. There are many very different abstract phenomena like numbers, courage, beauty, that can only appear indirectly through other phenomena. Phenomena like numbers, squares and circles, that only appear to us through reflection, are of main importance in Husserl's philosophical project. Husserl also uses this indirectness in his phenomenology of intersubjectivity in the fifth Cartesian Meditation. This last example in fact even goes another step further, by analyzing phenomena that do not only appear indirectly within the world, but also make the world as such possible. The same goes for Heidegger's phenomenological investigations of *Dasein*, the phenomenon that relates to its own being.

A next step in the process of increasing 'disappearance' of phenomenology's object can be found in Heidegger's use of the phenomenological method in his

27 Emmanuel Levinas, *Le temps et l'autre*, 2nd ed. (Montpellier, 1979), pp. 77–89; Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh, 1987), pp. 84–94.

28 Edmund Husserl, *Logische Untersuchungen* II,1 (Hua XIX/1), (The Hague 1984), pp. 377–533, II,2 (Hua XIX/2), pp. 582–631.

preparation for the question of being: being as such does not appear to us, but it can be thematized through its unveiling of beings. Being is not even a phenomenon anymore, but it comes up in and through phenomena.

Where on this 'scale of the unapparent' can we find Levinas' studies of human existence? His descriptions of fatigue and indolence show these forms of behaviour as intentions that do not have a determinate object. In Heideggerian terms, they do not have an ontical but an ontological meaning. The weariness that Levinas describes is not a tiredness of this or that but a tiredness of existence as such. Human existence as a whole and as such cannot appear to us as a phenomenon, but it can manifest itself through phenomena. Levinas' descriptions of weariness and laziness are comparable to Heidegger's analyses of anxiety and boredom: they reveal to us our existence as such, as a whole. They are manifestations of what cannot appear directly in itself as a phenomenon. So far, Levinas' work can be interpreted as a phenomenology of the unapparent. But then he even goes a step further on this scale of a phenomenology of the unapparent.

Human existence is still a way of being in the world. In fatigue and indolence we can discern no separation of being and human being yet. A difference comes to the fore when we turn to Levinas' descriptions of night and insomnia. They are portrayed as border experiences in which we seem to get a glimpse of the *il y a*. In Levinas' depiction, vigilance is an experience that points beyond all phenomena, even beyond personal human existence, towards the anonymous and chaotic *there is*. Here the separation comes to the fore in his work. According to Levinas, the meaningless current of being radically withdraws itself from any philosophical analysis or description. In *Time and the Other* a similar absolute alterity is attributed to death and to the other in the relation of *eros*.²⁹

The methodological problem here, of course, is that we can only make statements of what appears to us, of what is phenomenologically analyzable. That which absolutely withdraws from any experience or any examination can only be spoken of, as far as it can be experienced after all. Hence, alterity can be described as that which withdraws in the experience one can have of it, that which in its appearance withdraws from its own appearance. The special case of vigilance is that the experiencing subject loses itself in the experience of insomnia; that is exactly why Levinas calls it a border experience. But precisely because this border experience is an experience, we cannot speak here

29 Levinas, *Le temps et l'autre*, pp. 55–61, 77–84; Levinas, *Time and the Other*, pp. 68–73, 84–90.

of a radical separation. The separation as such can only be recognized in the appearance of what was supposed to be separated from all experience.³⁰

2.2 Methodological Problems

How can Levinas still speak here of phenomenological descriptions that show a radical separation? Can this be justified methodologically? Levinas is well aware of this problem, but he can not really offer a solution. He confines himself to calling for a new method without developing or elaborating this new method:

Our affirmation of an anonymous vigilance goes beyond the *phenomena*, which already presupposes an ego, and thus eludes descriptive phenomenology. Here description would make use of terms while striving to go beyond their consistency; it stages *personages*, while the *there is* is the dissipation of personages. A method is called for such that thought is invited to go beyond intuition. [*Indice d'une méthode où la pensée est invitée au delà de l'intuition*].³¹

There is, however, another method to which Levinas takes resort: the thought experiment of the 'world-annihilation'. Otherwise than Husserl, he uses this argument only in passing, in a short passage, without a methodological explanation. The fact that Levinas reaches a conclusion that is different from that of his teacher, can already be taken as an indication that we have a problematic argument here. Above that, one can simply see that in both cases the conclusions do not follow from the (imaginary) premises. Husserl shows that we can think of a consciousness that perceives chaotic and incoherent sensations, whereas there can be no coherence without a consciousness to which it appears—but that does not lead to consciousness as an absolute source of meaning, for consciousness also perceives itself as part of the world, as part of a specific culture and history. Comparably, Levinas can show that a stream of chaotic and incoherent sensations, and even their disappearance into nothingness, in itself still is an event and, instead of pure nothingness, should be taken as an 'empty' being without beings—but it does not follow that this

30 This is, as is well known, also the criticism of Derrida with regard to Levinas' phenomenology of the ethical relation to the absolutely other; cf. Jacques Derrida, "Violence et métaphysique," in Jacques Derrida, *L'écriture et la différence* (Paris 1967), pp. 117–228; Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London 1978), pp. 79–153.

31 Levinas, *De l'existence à l'existant*, p. 112; Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, p. 66.

meaninglessness is the main aspect of being as such, nor that its manifestation is always horrifying.

One might ask here whether Levinas' view on vigilance has to be understood on the basis of his view of being, or whether his idea of being as a meaningless 'murmuring' is a result of his analysis of the phenomenon of vigilance. I guess one will never know. More important is the conclusion that the separation between being and beings, which is the core of Levinas' early work and still has a central importance in his later work, cannot be phenomenologically demonstrated—regardless of whether one takes 'the phenomenological method' as a rigorous science or as an only loosely sketched 'way of doing'.³² Since the being that should perceive or demonstrate this radical division is itself part of it, the separation can never be absolute. Human being must have some relation to being as such, if it wants to confirm a separation from it, and this relation makes an absolute separation impossible. Levinas might call this a paradox instead of a contradiction, but that does not make his statement more convincing.

The analyses of fatigue and indolence are combined with the hypostasis in the idea that the human subject must accept and take upon itself its own existence, whether this is given to him from outside by creation or given by himself as his own origin. Just like the *il y a*, the idea of *hypostasis* cannot be justified with the phenomenological method. The subject can neither have an experience of its own beginning or source, nor of the time and place that it would possess before any coherence of the world. These are speculative statements that necessarily lack any empirical support. The phenomenological descriptions of night, insomnia, fatigue and indolence serve more as well written illustrations than as convincing arguments for a radical separation.

32 Levinas has devoted one article to the phenomenological method: "Réflexions sur la 'technique' phénoménologique," in *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*, pp. 111–123. He is reserved in speaking of a phenomenological method. Characterizing the phenomenological movement, he prefers articulations like 'a way of doing' (*une manière de faire, une façon d'être traité*), which finds its cohesion more in a way of asking questions than in adhering to fixed propositions. There are certain practices, courses of action (*procédés*), almost technical, more or less spontaneously used by those who are formed by the work of Husserl, but there is no strictly prescribed methodology. Accordingly, if one can speak of a phenomenological method, it is essentially an open method, certainly not a method in the sense of a rigorous science, as Husserl would have liked it to be. For this 'way of doing', Husserl's work is more like a prototype than a technology or a method. In this short article on the 'phenomenological technique', Levinas discusses description, intentionality, sensibility and subjectivity as elements of phenomenological practices.

2.3 *A Trace of Husserlian Metaphysics*

But there is another problem attached to the hypostasis, i.e. the notion of the subject as preceding the world and as locked up in a world that can be reduced to it. Everything that comes up in his world is related to him and receives its meaning from him. In contrast to Heidegger's *Dasein*, the Levinasian subject is locked up in itself; the freedom of its openness toward the future is a secondary trait. The existent first relates to its own position and then it also has a world. This solitude haunts all the phenomenological explorations that Levinas has undertaken, all the studies of intentional relations in the world. On the basis of this pre-phenomenal position of the subject, all phenomena are understood as appearing within the circular relation by which the subject is bound to itself.

Levinas has developed rich and subtle analyses of what appears in the world. To recall a few examples: he distinguishes the elementary sensations from the role they play in the constitution of knowledge. In a similar way, the enjoyment (*jouissance*) the subject experiences in phenomena is taken apart from the practical use that is emphasized by Heidegger in the relation of *Zuhandenheit*.³³ Labour and inhabiting are also examined as substantial characteristics of human existence.³⁴ All these phenomena, however, are enclosed in a world, they are inextricably linked to the relation the subject has with itself. In his later main work, *Totality and Infinity*, these phenomenological analyses all return as elements of the "Economy of the Self."³⁵ Despite all the richness of this life 'in the world', the subject cannot, according to Levinas, escape his solitude. He is all the time confined in his own world. The meaning of all the phenomena and of existence itself is always constituted within this same circle.

The Heideggerian idea of *Jemeinigkeit* seems to be taken to its extremes by Levinas. Every experience must be primarily understood as *my* experience, every phenomenon as a phenomenon that appears for *me*, receiving its meaning from *me*, because its meaning depends on the place it can receive within the references of *my* world. This solitude, however, can as well be interpreted as a Husserlian trace within Levinas' phenomenology. It is not by coincidence that the German term *Sinngebung* so often returns in *Totality and Infinity*. Levinas

33 One can recognize a general structure in these analyses that often returns in Levinas' work: the structure of relative autonomy within a relation of dependency. For instance: the subject not only needs food to stay alive but enjoys a good meal as well; the self is both free and autonomous, and subordinate to the other.

34 Levinas, *De l'existence à l'existant*, pp. 53–81; Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, pp. 37–51. See also Levinas, *Le temps et l'autre*, pp. 39–54; Levinas, *Time and the Other*, pp. 58–68.

35 Levinas, *Totalité et infini*, pp. 81–158; Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, pp. 107–183.

sees *Sinngebung* as the main characteristic of intentionality. In Husserl, the meaning of the phenomena is always given by the subject, by the free and independent transcendental ego—which can be taken as a basic aspect of his transcendental idealism. In other words, the solitude of the Levinasian subject is a trace of Husserl's transcendental idealism.³⁶

But in Levinas, this trace is extended into an existential phenomenology. Moreover, the *Sinngebung* is threatened by the meaningless indeterminacy of the *ilya*, in which the subject can always fall back. The design of the world and the arrangements of one's life might always be fractured and lose their protection against the abyss of the *ilya*.

The only solution, according to Levinas, to these shortcomings of human existence is offered in the transcendent relation with an absolute other. This is where theology comes in—if it had not already come in with Levinas' reference to the notion of *creation ex nihilo*. In *Time and the Other* this relation is articulated as an erotic and parental relationship with the other, whereas in *Totality and Infinity* it has become a mainly ethical relationship. The dichotomy of the Self and the Other has been completed here.

The *Sinngebung* that was a cornerstone for the Husserlian transcendental idealism, has become in Levinas a stumbling block, a fundamental problem within phenomenology as such, and it can only be surmounted by leading phenomenology beyond itself. As a result, both ends of Levinas' phenomenological thought—the start of human existence in the hypostasis and the liberating ethical relation to the other which is the final source of meaning—consist of metaphysical postulates that surround and enclose his phenomenological descriptions.

Husserl's transcendental idealism has all the aspects of modern metaphysics that Heidegger wanted to overcome; in his work these aspects are intrinsically merged with phenomenological investigations. Levinas' revision of this metaphysical trace in an existential phenomenological framework does not only turn the idealism of the *Sinngebung* into a problem; it also leads Levinas away from the phenomenological 'way of doing' to a new metaphysics beyond phenomenology.

36 Again in other words, the Husserlian problem that was interpreted by Janicaud as the starting point of the divide within French phenomenology between the 'intertwining' and the 'aplomb', i.e. the problematical relation of the eidetic constitution to the life-world, this problem has never really been overcome by Levinas.

2.4 *Horizons and Responsibility*

Moreover, the horizon as depicted here by Levinas is a problematic idea of horizon. According to Levinas, the subject is confined in his own world, radically separated from what is outside its horizon: *il y a*, death, the other. Within his own world, the subject is the sole source of meaning of everything that appears in this world. The horizon is thus pictured as a closed border that is nevertheless broken through by the *il y a* and, especially in Levinas' later work, by the other. The horizon functions as a closure of the totality of my world that needs to be disrupted by a radical exteriority.

In contrast, the metaphor of the horizon has been used by many philosophers to articulate the flexible, changeable and open limits of the historical and cultural embeddedness of human existence. Nietzsche, Dilthey, Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Gadamer—they all stress the openness of the horizon. The horizon is a border that moves with us. What is now beyond the horizon can be included in it in the future. On the one hand, the horizon is a demarcation that excludes alterity, on the other hand we can broaden our horizon and take otherness into account. We are able to imagine an abstract alterity that is radically and absolutely other, but that can never be experienced, nor appear as a phenomenon. Even such an abstract idea, however, can only be constructed within a horizon. Precisely this idea of the horizon as a flexible openness towards otherness is used by Husserl in his phenomenological descriptions of intersubjectivity.³⁷ Therefore, taking the horizon as an absolute border is a *contradictio in terminis*.

But what, then, becomes of the call of the other and its profound ethical meaning that, according to Levinas, can only be thought of as an interruption of a coherent totality? A short and simple answer to this question is that the responsibility the other calls for, is not dependent on a supposed absolute alterity of the other. Other human beings can appear in my world as subjects who receive their meaning for a part as located in my world, as subjects whom I can love and hate, to whose actions I can anticipate and who can surprise me—and at the same time they are different from me, with an irreducible otherness that summons me to be responsible. More than that, the other can only make me responsible by appearing as other to me in my world.

37 Edmund Husserl, *Cartesianische Meditationen. Eine Einführung in die Phänomenologie* (Hua 1), (The Hague 1963), pp. 121–183. The problematic aspects of this Husserlian intersubjectivity are caused by its relation to the Cartesian ego to which Husserl wants to stick as well—it is precisely this feature that Levinas takes over in his existential phenomenology.

In addition, it is not only the receding other within my horizon that calls me to be responsible; also the horizon itself can be understood as a source of responsibility. Horizons are more than demarcations of my world. They move with me and therefore I can never fully understand and locate them. This means that I do not know or control the limits of my world. I cannot overlook my world and my existence as a whole. From the moment that I relate to my world and to my existence as such, they withdraw from my understanding. Consequently, every worldview and every opinion with regard to my existence is necessarily finite, restricted and therefore also criticizable. I can no longer fall back on traditional cultural conventions and authorities as if they were self-evident. The choices that I make have to be accounted for. In other words: the horizon as such has an element of transcendence that is a source of responsibility.³⁸

3 Conclusions

Where does the ‘theological turn’ come from? In the case of Levinas, as we have seen, the radical separation between Self and Other has its origin in the separation between being and being human. The so called ‘theological turn’, therefore, is, at least in the case of Levinas, not a real turn but an effect of a metaphysical trace that has been left in Levinas’ phenomenology. The self-supportive Husserlian subject of transcendental idealism has been built into the context of existential phenomenology, playing an ambiguous role as the economic circle of the self that is there to be interrupted by the other. Neither the preceding separation between being and being human, however, nor the solitude of the subject that is locked up in his own world is supported by the phenomenological analyses of fatigue, indolence and insomnia. In addition, Levinas can give no methodological justification for his theses that go beyond phenomenological descriptions. Fortunately, the call to responsibility towards the other is not endangered by these shortcomings, for it is not dependent on a radical separation. Even more, this call can be better understood with reference to an open horizon that is not a strict enclosure of a totality.

38 Responsibility as called for by the horizon, is an important theme in the philosophy of Jan Patočka. See, e.g., Jan Patočka, *Body, Community, Language, World* (Chicago, 1998), pp. 33–37; Jan Patočka, *Plato and Europe* (Stanford, 2002), pp. 15–37.