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Benda Hofmeyr  
Editor

Radical Passivity

Rethinking Ethical Agency in Levinas

This volume includes critical approaches to radical passivity from a variety of perspectives (both critical and favourable) covering the entire scope of Levinas's oeuvre, including both his philosophical as well as his so-called spiritual works or *Talmudic Readings*. The contributing authors speak with widely diverse voices, which will hopefully appeal to a diversified and interdisciplinary readership. This collection will certainly be of interest to an expert academic audience in a wide variety of disciplines, including Philosophical Ethics (or Practical Philosophy), Philosophical Anthropology, Social and Political Philosophy, Religious Studies, Literary Studies, Applied Ethics, Theology, Judaic Studies, etcetera. It is also likely to appeal to people outside of academia interested in that which makes ethical agency possible. The host of featured authors (from Canada, America, the Netherlands, Belgium, England, Austria and South Africa) and their varied perspectives accord this work an assured international appeal. All the contributions have been subjected to extensive peer and editorial review.

Benda Hofmeyr  
Pretoria, South Africa  
July 2008

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## Chapter 1

# Radical Passivity: Ethical Problem or Solution?\*

Benda Hofmeyr

**Abstract** In our present-day Western society, there has been an increasing tendency towards individualism and indifference and away from altruism and empathy. This has led to a resurgence of ethical concerns in contemporary Continental philosophy. Following the thinking of philosophers such as Emmanuel Levinas, ethics has come to be defined in terms of a disinterested and selfless concern for the well-being of others. Levinas claims that taking care of others in need is not a free, rational decision, but a fundamental responsibility that is pre-consciously felt. We are passively obligated before we can actively choose to help. Levinas therefore argues that the needy other incapacitates our normal selfish ways, and that this 'radical passivity' enables us to recognize our inherent responsibility towards others in need. Levinas's own thinking on this subject is not unambiguous, however. While his early works stress the fact that we cannot care for others if we do not first take care of ourselves, his later works focus exclusively on the other as the locus of our ethical responsibility. Following this line of thinking, a false opposition has emerged between an absolutized egoism and a crushing altruism that threatens to undermine the recent resurgence of ethical concerns. For how can we continue to care for others if we fail to recognize the duties we have towards ourselves? Moreover, what is the moral significance of responsible action if it is not freely chosen but passively imposed? The first part of this chapter attempts to introduce and problematize radical passivity with the aid of Kant's practical philosophy. The second part follows renowned Levinas scholar Roger Burggraeve's suggestion that the paradoxical dynamics at work in radical passivity can best be explained by tracing Jean Wahl's influence on Levinas.

What is radical passivity? Why is radical passivity potentially an ethical problem, while Levinas presents it as *the* ethical solution? Those readers familiar with Levinas's thought might object to this very line of questioning – arguing that radical passivity is neither a solution nor a (philosophical) problem but rather a moral/

\* This essay was written for the colloquium, *Radical Passivity: Rethinking Ethical Agency in Levinas* organized by myself and hosted by the Jan van Eyck Academie, Maastricht (NL) on 24 November 2006. It was subsequently published in 2007 in the *South African Journal of Philosophy* 26(3): 150–167. It is reprinted here in slightly modified form with the permission of the author.



aesthetic and mystical (i.e. highly religiously inflected) notion brought about by the very proximity of the other person. While I would concur with this assessment, radical passivity nevertheless presents itself as either a problem or solution when conceived within a critical framework in which we reflect upon the conditions of possibility of ethical agency. Levinas would say that egotistical freedom – that serves the needs of the self at the expense of the other – is the problem and that radical passivity – as an incapacitation of that freedom – is a solution. Radical passivity, therefore, potentially becomes a problem when we question Levinas's premise that ethical action cannot be based on the freedom of the individual. In other words, by employing this line of questioning I want to assess the moral significance of the inversion of the traditional conception of agency associated with freedom of choice.

In order to be able to introduce and problematize the notion of radical passivity, the first part of this paper will sketch the deployment of ethical subjectivity in Levinas's works. I shall consider to what extent a Kantian perspective can aid such a problematization. The second part will explore Roger Burggraeve's suggestion that the dynamics at play in Levinas can be best understood by excavating the influence of Jean Wahl on Levinas's thought. While the first part consists in an introduction and problematization of radical passivity, the second part attempts to understand the moral worth of and paradoxical forces at work in a radically passive agent – as analysed by Burggraeve.

## Introduction and Problematization

### What Is Radical Passivity?

The last few decades have witnessed a decisive ethical turn in literary, cultural and (Continental) philosophical discourses. This 'recentering of the ethical' followed rather uneasily from 'the decentering of the subject', that is, from the critique of the ideal, autonomous and sovereign subject (cf. Garber et al. 2000: viii–ix). For how is ethics to be recentred without its centre, without moral agency understood as sovereign rational autonomy?

Disenchanted with Man, wary of falling into the trap of moralizing liberalism, with no desire to resurrect the unprecedentedly arrogant and self-righteous transcendental Ego – discovered by Rousseau and reaching its apotheosis in Husserl's phenomenology of consciousness – the kind of ethical philosophy that has come to occupy the centre stage in recent times has sworn allegiance to its post-humanist legacy. To do so, it had to find a way to radically disrupt ethical agency – an ethics in which the agent is characterized by a radical passivity and should therefore be written under erasure. This ethical agent has found its most exemplary if not most influential articulation in the thought of

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This chapter represents the first tentative steps towards a critical reevaluation of ethical agency conceived in terms of radical passivity. I wish to assess the moral significance of the inversion or disruption of the traditional conception of agency associated with freedom of choice. For Levinas, on the other hand, responsibility cannot be a choice, for if there had been a choice, ethics would merely serve the needs of the self and would therefore become utilitarian (AE, 136/173–174).<sup>1</sup>

What happens in radical passivity might be best explained in terms of George Bataille's fascination with the photograph of the torture of a Chinese man. The image depicts a man being dismembered and disembowelled while being kept conscious with opium. This is betrayed by the expression on the sufferer's face – at once ecstatic and intolerable. What is important in this context is *not the violence* of the image, but Bataille's reaction to it, that is, its impact – something I cannot explain by using one of Levinas's examples such as the destitute orphan or beggar. We have long since become desensitized (and discouraged from responding)<sup>2</sup> to the hapless appeals for handouts by the beggar on the street. Bataille became obsessed with this image in which ecstasy and horrendous pain collide. The excruciating suffering undergone by the vulnerable other caused him to become extremely upset. It distressed him so much that he became delirious, distressed to the point of immobilization (Bataille 1986: 244). This obsession is the 'substance' of Levinas's ethics: involuntary fascination, arresting paralysis that overcomes conscious thought:

[o]ne does not merely observe a scene here. For when the other person is drained of all substance, when his reality is his erosion ... then the borders between stage and audience are suspended and we are "involved", "elected", "singularized". The paralysis of the subject is an uncontrollable rapport with the other person that absolves all proper difference between Same and Other. It is an intimacy more profound than sympathy or empathy (Wall 1999: 54).

Levinas is trying to articulate the fragile and indefinable relation with *Autrui* as that from which I cannot distinguish myself. More intimate (and inaccessible) than any perception, experience or feeling, radical passivity 'gives' nonpresence. What brings about this nonpresence in Levinas is the arresting proximity of the Other that obsesses the subject to the point of paralysis – an inability or nonintentionality that seizes us from the outside. *Autrui* is arresting and paralyzing. There is an identification of the Same with the Other that enucleates the Same of sameness, rendering it other to itself (cf. *ibid.*, pp. 52–55). This outside is so far outside that it paradoxically comes from those inaccessible, remote recesses within the self. This is the structure of ethical

<sup>1</sup>Where two page references are provided, the English translation is followed by the original French page references.

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, the Dutch weekly *Elsevier's* article, "Rotterdam: Geef niet aan bedelaars!" ["Rotterdam: Do not give to beggars!"] of 12 December 2006 featuring the Rotterdam municipality's anti-begging campaign to curb the nuisance caused by beggars in the central shopping district despite the prohibition imposed on begging in 2003. On the Internet: <http://www.elsevier.nl/ainius/mchordland/artikel/class/artnr/13073007/roekem/ia/indw.html>



subjectivity in Levinas's mature writings: a paralysis in which the subject becomes 'sub-jectum' (AE, 116/147), that is, subjected to alterity 'despite itself', a necessity imposed from an outside that is paradoxically lodged *within* the depths of the soul, that is the very ensoulment of the self (AE, 69/86, 112/143).

Passivity in the radical sense, before it is simply opposed to activity, is passive with regard to *itself*, and thus it yields to itself as though it were an external force. Hence, radical passivity harbours within itself a *potentia* (Wall 1999: 1).<sup>3</sup> It is a confrontation with an other within the depths of the self. According to this view then, ethical agency follows from a force that incapacitates our egotistical (unethical) inclinations. Put differently, radical passivity runs counter to the received commonplace that, without freedom – the radical freedom to choose amongst various actions without inducement and with full impunity, like Gyges<sup>4</sup> – none of our choices would be morally significant. They would be like the jerks of a puppet's limbs, controlled by the strings of forces beyond our control. And what moral value does a puppet or its movements have?

### Why Is Radical Passivity Potentially an Ethical Problem Rather Than a Solution?

#### The Deployment of Ethical Subjectivity in Levinas

The first step towards unravelling the enigma of a radically passive agent consists in following the trajectory of Levinas's ethical metaphysics, which reaches its apotheosis in Levinas's second *magnum opus*, *Autrement qu' êtrement au delà de l'essence* (1974).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup>In Latin *potentia* (power) is derived from *potest* (can).

<sup>4</sup>Relevant in this regard are Levinas's repeated references to the myth of Gyges, originally conveyed by Glaucon in Plato's *Republic* (II, 359b–360c). For Levinas, Gyges's magic ring that enabled him to become invisible is representative of the independence and interiority of the I. With the aid of the ring, Gyges became invisible and 'broke with participation'. Participation, according to Levinas, is a way of referring to the other: 'it is to have and unfold one's own being without at any point losing contact with the other' (TI, 61/32). To break with participation is to maintain contact, but no longer derive one's being from this contact: 'it is to see without being seen, like Gyges'. It is to draw one's existence from oneself, to come forth from a dimension of interiority (ibid.). When Gyges became invisible, the assembled shepherds spoke of him as if he was no longer there – he became an absolutely independent interiority, 'which exists non-recognized'. Gyges saw those who looked at him without seeing him, and he knew that he was not seen, that his crimes would not be seen. His position involved the impunity of a being alone in the world. Such a solitary being alone is capable of uncontested and unpunished freedom. 'The inner life, the I, separation', writes Levinas, 'are uprootedness itself, non-participation, and consequently the ambivalent possibility of error and of truth'.

<sup>5</sup>As we shall see, there is a clear paradigm shift in Levinas's thinking between *Totality and Infinity* (1961) and *Otherwise than Being* (1974). The thematics that form the focal point of AE are fully

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Levinas's turn to ethics and its concomitant invalidation of 'the autonomy of subjective freedom' (Dialogue, 27) was supported by a profound wariness of resurrecting the transcendental ego (AE, 57/73). His first major work, *Totalité et infini*, is precisely devoted to the critique of the unquestioned valorization of freedom. For Levinas, freedom is suspect, because it denotes 'the determination of the other by the same' and '[t]his imperialism of the same is the whole essence of freedom'. 'To welcome the Other', on the other hand, 'is to put in question that freedom' (TI, 85–87/57–59). Ethics, for Levinas, therefore constitutes the moment when the arbitrary freedom of the individual egoistic subject is curbed, and when it learns to recognize its responsibility to others instead of merely using or assimilating alterity to serve its own egoist economy. In his second major work, *Autrement qu' être*, Levinas proceeds to defend the thesis that the freedom of the existent has nothing to do with ethics:

[t]he responsibility for the other cannot have begun in my commitment, in my decision... [It] comes from the hither side of my freedom, from a "prior to every memory", ... from the non-present par excellence, ... the an-archival, prior to or beyond essence. The responsibility for the other is the locus in which is situated the null-site of subjectivity (AE, 10/12).

Responsibility cannot be a rational weighing of options, for if there had been a choice, ethics would merely serve the needs of the self and would therefore become utilitarian (ibid., pp. 136/173–174). A commitment already presupposes a theoretical consciousness, an intentional thought that grasps and therefore violates (136/174). For Levinas, this would go beyond the susceptibility of passivity and would reinstate the other-reductive imperialisms of the self. For him, the limits imposed on the freedom of subjectivity cannot be equated with privation (122/156–157). On the contrary, he insists that the antecedence of responsibility to freedom signifies the Goodness of the Good: the necessity that the Good chooses me first before I can be in a position to choose, that is, welcome its choice. This is my pre-originary *susceptiveness*. My radical passivity consists in facing a responsibility that I cannot shoulder, for something that I have not done but which I cannot deny without denying myself. It is lodged in me – subjectivity is the other-in-the-same – and imposes a necessity on the arbitrariness of my freedom and thereby invests my freedom or unburdens me of my freedom that cannot but lead me astray.

Paradoxically, however, the works preceding AE consist to a large extent in an insistence upon the necessity of our subjective, pre-ethical freedom. The focal point of Levinas's earliest three works, *De l'existence à l'existant* (1947), *Le temps et l'autre* (1948) and *Totalité et infini* (1961), is the transcendence or self-transcendence of the self, and Levinas expressly presents his first *magnum opus*, TI, as a defence of subjectivity (TI, 26/xiv). In these early works, the question of the self-transcendence of the self certainly precedes and is never eclipsed by the question of ethics. The problem of the subject's escape from itself,<sup>6</sup> from the unbearable heaviness of being to which it is

<sup>6</sup>The question of the subject's need for escape from itself is dealt with extensively in an early essay 'De l'Évasion' (1935) (for the English translation, see Levinas 1982c).



riveted is resolved in the course of these works in terms of ethics or the encounter with the Other. Levinas therefore maintains that the subject only truly comes into being – in any meaningful sense – as ethical subject, that is, after the Other has ‘converted’ me from myself to face my infinite responsibility towards others. Levinas nevertheless insists that the existent’s economic existence in the world, which he considers to be pre-ethical or egotistical, is ethically *necessary*.

Structurally we can therefore distinguish two moments in Levinas’s thinking regarding the subject: (1) the existent’s pre-ethical ‘economic’ life; and (2) the ethical subject or *creature’s* ethical life. Up to TI, economic self-sufficiency acts as the necessary condition for ethical generosity. His phenomenological analyses from EE to TI describe the existent’s ‘auto-personification’ (TI, 147/120). During its ‘economic life’ in the world, the existent cares for itself and forms itself as independent entity. Only as auto-positing or self-created, i.e. radically free and self-sufficient, can it be host to the other – receive the other not with empty hands, but with something to give. In AE, Levinas will disavow any preceding existential base, but in TI he still argues in favour of a simultaneity.

In the works preceding AE, Levinas approaches subjectivity from two distinctly different but, in his view, complementary angles: on the one hand, he conceptualizes subjectivity in terms of ‘enjoyment’. The egoist existent embodies the ‘arbitrary’ freedom of economic existence. It is portrayed as ‘without ears like a hungry stomach’ (TI, 134/107) – naturally inclined to persist in the blind pursuit of its self-serving drives and desires. On the other hand, this same subject is a self that does not coincide with itself. It occurs, on the contrary, as a ‘diasistasis’ (EE, 18/16, TA, 69/163; TI, 238–239/215–216). Even in enjoyment it is haunted by a negativity at the heart of its existence – the effort to evade the gravity of materiality and solitude, the absurdity of being (*il y a*). In TI, it is this ‘nothingness’ at the centre of being that will open a dimension in interiority ‘through which it will be able to await and welcome the revelation of transcendence’. This ‘frontier’ does *not* come from ‘the revelation of the Other ... but *somehow from nothingness*’ (TI, 150/124, my emphasis). In TI, the ethical subject is therefore still host to two conditions at the same time – both an independent egoist self (i.e. radically free) and capable of ‘self-critique’, which makes the call of the Other *audible* to the ‘deaf’ existent.<sup>7</sup> In the works that follow, Levinas will disavow the subject’s economic existential base and with it the subject’s capacity for ‘self-critique’. Its susceptibility to the Other then does not stem from any inner dimension of heteronomy, but from the Other, from the idea of Infinity that the Other puts into the subject. This is not a choice

<sup>7</sup> The negativity at the heart of the existent’s being causes it not to coincide with itself. The existent thus appears as a *diasistasis*, as a being standing apart from itself. Since the existent is not in equilibrium, it is driven outside itself and thus becomes susceptible to alterity. For the later Levinas, this relation would be based on need and would therefore not be ethical. As we shall discover, he solves this problem by replacing this ‘nothingness’ at the centre of being with the *non-essential anarchic presence* of the other in the same.

made from a position of radical freedom, like Gyges (TI, 61/32), but the radical passivity of a being chosen.<sup>8</sup>

There is thus a clear paradigm shift – that is nevertheless not a hard break – discernible between TI and AE from egoism and freedom to ethics and the subjection of freedom, which is commensurate with Levinas’s move to radical passivity.<sup>9</sup> Did he manage to find a viable explanation for the possibility of ethicality in this amoral, indifferent world, or did he throw out the baby (radical freedom) with the bathwater in his turn to radical passivity? It is here that a Kantian perspective might be useful: the general consensus is that Levinas’s move from economic life to ethical life coincides with Kant’s supplement of the hypothetical imperative with the categorical imperative. However, this reading does not account for Kant’s insistence that moral virtue derives from an incessant struggle against our inclinations, a struggle that presupposes the freedom of Gyges (cf. *Morals*, 7:405/66–67). It is this freedom (described as ‘non-freedom’ (AE, 123/158–159)) that Levinas disposes of in AE. Following Adrian Peperzak, Levinas’s break with pre-ethical, arbitrary freedom can be challenged if the following is true:

[t]he “fact” of the other is the revelation of the infinite, because it breaks the totality of my world and urges another orientation upon me – an orientation that coincides with my desire for the absolute.

If this is an accurate representation of Levinas’s thought, it suggests a certain coincidence of myself-as-desire with myself-as-the-host-of-another (Peperzak, 213). If pre-ethical freedom as the desire for happiness (self-actualization or – transcendence) coincides with ethical freedom as the desire for the absolute, ethics and ‘economics’ are inextricably linked. Levinas explicitly states that we cannot concretely care for others without the necessary resources acquired through the satisfaction of our needs. Kant can also be read as opposing the idea of a universe in which goodness and happiness remain irreconcilable, for it would run counter to the necessary presuppositions and demands of reason.

### Assessing Radical Passivity from a Kantian Perspective

For Kant, freedom is freedom from an over-determination by our egotistical drives and desires, and the law that imposes a necessity upon this (radical) freedom liberates freedom to be ethical. In Levinas’s terminology, it ‘invests’ freedom with another

<sup>8</sup> Subjectivity understood as ‘an identity in diastasis’ (AE, 115/147) therefore returns in AE as if to rectify – after psychoanalysis and structuralism – a supposedly oversimplified account of subjectivity as ‘enjoyment’. This rectification seems to forget that the subject never coincided with itself, not even in enjoyment.

<sup>9</sup> In TI, the ethical subject is presented as both an independent egoist self (i.e. radically free) and responsible. Myself-as-desire (egoism) coincides with myself-as-host-of-another (ethics). Although Levinas will continue to insist on both, there is a clear paradigm shift between TI and AE from the freedom of economic life to the subjection of freedom that is characteristic of ethical life.



orientation towards the Other – it frees us to take up the responsibility we bear towards others. For Kant and Levinas, radical freedom can be equated with puppetry, since the existent is strung along by its drives and desires – *involuntarily* egotistical.

Both Kant and Levinas respectively claim, in other words, that necessity is not inconsistent with liberty. According to Kant, we are free when we are not *solely* determined by our desires and needs. Freedom cannot be equated with the absence of determination. A wholly undetermined will would be random and chaotic – it would not allow for responsibility, nor consequently for praise or blame. Kant argues that the only viable way to think of a free will is to think of it as a will whose choices are determined by a law that is internal to its nature. A perfectly rational or 'holy' will is determined only by itself, by its own inner lawfulness, and is therefore free. We finite beings, on the other hand, have to contend with our desires. Hence for us the operation of the law in our rational will is not automatic. We feel its operation within us as a constraint, because it must act against the pull of desire. In finite beings, Kant says, the moral law 'necessitates' rather than acting necessarily (Groundwork, 4:413–414/81). For Kant, then, pre-ethical, arbitrary freedom co-exists with necessity, and moral virtue is conceived as a struggle against our inclinations (cf. *Morals*, 7:405/66–67).<sup>10</sup>

A free will in the Kantian sense is, in other words, a will whose volition or decisions are governed by an internal directive. At first sight, Kant's insistence upon this autonomous will – not ruled by anything outside itself, whether external authority or internal motive, conscience or inclination – seems to be opposed to the heteronomous responsibility Levinas insists upon. However, in Kant, as in Levinas, I am incapable of establishing the law to which I find myself subject (Peperzak, 212). The general consensus is therefore that Kant's moral law functions analogously to radical passivity. However, as we have seen, in Kant, freedom and necessity (law) co-exist in the struggle between what we want to do and what we ought to do (*Morals*, 7:405/66–67), whereas in Levinas, pre-ethical freedom is uneducable or irreconcilable with necessity (EE, 93/158). Kant's practical philosophy therefore uncovers the ethical necessity of radical freedom (*contra* Levinas).

In his introduction to *Otherwise than Being*, Alphonso Lingis typifies the relationship between Kant and Levinas as follows:

Levinas does not express this situation according to the Kantian typology, as a veritable constitution of autonomy out of this inaugural heteronomy of the law – where I must act as though it is I myself that give myself the law to which I am subject (AE, xxxiv).

In this passage, the emphasis is very much on 'I must act as though' for Kant might have given autonomy pride of place, as Peperzak points out, yet he was well aware that before I become aware of it, I am not able to establish the law by which I discover myself to be ruled. Kant's conception of the moral law might then not be so far removed from

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the extreme passivity, the expropriation and enucleation that is paradoxically constitutive of the self in the later Levinas. For Kant's moral law seems to function as a kind of inaccessible nonmenal dimension – 'transcendent', 'unintelligible', 'inscrutable' – within the subject, paradoxically ordering it from the outside, as it were.<sup>11</sup>

Lingis continues:

[y]et the [Levinas] calls the Kantian formula remarkable, and reinterprets it to mean that the Law I recognize is first formulated in my own words of obedience – the "Here I am". Here I exist as the author of what was put to me despite myself and unbeknownst to myself (AE, xxxiv–xxxv).

Of course, in neither Kant nor Levinas does the I figure 'as the author' (of the law). What is at stake in Levinas's notion of disrupted agency is precisely the 'despite myself and unbeknownst to myself'.

The neighbour assigns me before I designate him. This is a modality not of a knowing, but of an obsession, a shuddering of the human quite different from cognition ... I am as it were ordered from the outside, traumatically commanded, without interiorizing by representation and concepts the authority that commands me.

The Other's hold over me arises on the ground of the antecedent relationship of obsession. Obsession is not consciousness, but overwhelms the consciousness that tends to assume it. 'It is unassumable like a persecution' (AE, 87/109). The Other's hold over me precedes any contract that could have been concluded between free and conscious subjects. This implies that, in the face of another, the I no longer stands in the nominative, but in the accusative, as is literally apparent in the French expression, '*me voice*'.<sup>12</sup> The English translation, 'here I am', renders the subject in the active nominative, whereas '*me voice*' relegates the I to the position of passive accusative. My being before the Other is not the outcome of my initiative and conscious action. I am before the Other in spite of myself – passively.

Until now, I have offered a rather critical assessment of radical passivity, placing the emphasis on the impoverished notion of freedom on which radical passivity is premised. What, then, would be the advantages of a passive ethical agent? Following Roger Burggraeve, I shall now turn to Jean Wahl's influence on Levinas – specifically his distinction between trans-*ascendence* and trans-*descentence*. This should shed some light on why Levinas argues in favour of radical passivity, and explain the strange enigma<sup>13</sup> of an ethical appeal that emanates from within the subject *while* ordering it from the outside.

<sup>11</sup> The subject is ordered from the outside, and yet commanded from within. As will become evident, this is the very strange and paradoxical confluence of the 'from on high' and 'from below' of transcendence in Levinas.

<sup>12</sup> More radically, Levinas maintains that the 'I is passivity more passive than any passivity, because it is from the outset in the accusative, oneself – which had never been in the nominative – under the accusation of another, although without sin' (DVI, 68).

<sup>13</sup> In 'Phenomenon and Enigma' (CP, 61–74), Levinas calls the Other's way of manifesting himself *without* manifesting himself an 'enigma', referring back to the etymology of the Greek term (i.e. an obscure or equivocal word, a riddle).

<sup>10</sup> In this sense, Kant's practical philosophy points us towards a critical reevaluation of radical passivity in Levinas. A thoroughgoing reevaluation of radical passivity could potentially furnish us with a fundamental framework for reflecting on the resurgence of ethics in contemporary Continental philosophy literature and cultural theory.



## Appreciation of the Dynamics

### Why Is Radical Passivity Potentially an Ethical Solution Rather Than a Problem?

#### Jean Wahl's Influence: Transascendence versus Transcendence in Levinas<sup>14</sup>

Following his mentor, Jean Wahl (1888–1974), Levinas conceives of the relation between the self and Other in terms of a double movement – a trans-ascendence and a trans-descendence.<sup>15</sup> Reacting against all intellectualistic systematism, Wahl sought a direct and thoroughgoing contact with reality through feeling. According to him, ‘immediate contact with the real is accomplished in the very contraction of feeling, “a bare, blind contact with the Other”’ (PN, 117/173). Feeling therefore involves a movement outward towards the other outside oneself, that is, trans-ascendence. It is an ascending move in which a being departs out of its being, surpassing itself in the process. In other words, in feeling the subject is propelled beyond itself towards the other than itself. According to Wahl, without something outside or beyond itself, the human condition would be wretched. What gives human life meaning is trans-ascendence: ‘[d]esire, the source of happiness, of existence above existence, is not a simple lack, a simple emptiness. The appetite for life increases and confirms man’s existence’ (ibid., p. 112/167). This movement of desire is not, however, a going towards and an assimilation of the desired object. It is a dynamic ‘without closure, without conclusion’ (OS, 74/109), so that feeling becomes a bottomless, infinite desire (PN, 113–115/168–169).<sup>16</sup>

In this transascendent movement, then, the person is elevated above itself, ‘going-beyond’ itself without falling back upon itself (OS, 74/109). This infinite desire for the Other that bears the subject beyond itself is described by Levinas as ‘the primordial feeling’. Precisely by virtue of being a feeling, this encounter with the Other is not only an outward dynamic, but also has an inward impact on the subject itself.

<sup>14</sup> I am indebted to Roger Burggraeve, who brought the significance of Jean Wahl’s influence on Levinas’s thinking to my attention. I am thinking of two conference presentations in particular, which he gave in Rome (‘A Century with Levinas: Visage et Infirmité’ held on 24–27 May 2006) and Nijmegen (‘A Century with Levinas: First Philosophy, Phenomenology and Ethics’ held on 21–23 September 2006) respectively (and discussions with him that followed these lectures) on the Levinasian movement from exteriority to the interiority of the Infinite. The following part draws heavily upon Burggraeve’s research. See, for example, Burggraeve 2007: 260–280 (in Dutch).

<sup>15</sup> Levinas explicitly acknowledges Jean Wahl’s influence in *Totalité et infini* (see footnote 5, 35/5). He has also dedicated two studies to Wahl’s thought: ‘Jean Wahl et le sentiment’ (1955) and ‘Jean Wahl. Sans avoir ni être’ (1976). These two essays are respectively translated as ‘Jean Wahl and Feeling’ (in PN, 110–118) and ‘Jean Wahl. Neither Having nor Being’ (in OS, 67–83).

<sup>16</sup> Wahl’s influence is clearly evident in Levinas’s distinction between need and desire (see, for

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‘[T]his desire for infinity ... consequently leaves the subject in immanence. Is not this the immanence which Jean Wahl ... called “the greatest transcendence”’, asks Levinas, ‘... that which consists in transcending transcendence, that is relapsing immanence?’ (*Existence humaine et transcendance* (Neuchâtel: Editions de La Baconnière 1944), 38) (CPP, 62–63, footnote 4).<sup>17</sup> Thus another movement is discernible here. Apart from a trans-ascendent or upward dynamic, there is also the mention of a ‘relapsing immanence’. The latter, instead of going up and away, is suggestive of a downward or backward movement – a trans-descendence. For Levinas, this movement of descent into the underground of the I spells the ethical redefinition of the self. In other words, the ascending intentionality of feeling, the direct and intense contact with the Other, is linked with a descending movement into the subject itself. To the extent that the ‘blind, bare contact’ with the Other is a primordial feeling – a ‘jolt, a shiver, a spasm’ (PN, 114/169) – this contact likewise brings about a fundamental change in the subject itself. Before exploring this descendent movement further, let us take a closer look at trans-ascendence.

#### Trans-ascendence, the Face and the Idea of Infinity

The trans-ascendant movement, then, sets the subject on the upward path to God,<sup>18</sup> starting from the face of the other person that addresses me and imposes the responsibility I bear towards others. How does the other person succeed in affecting me in this way? According to Levinas, the encounter with the other person coincides with the ‘epiphany of the face’, that is, the face consists in a manifestation of God. In order to ‘embody’ an expression of this nature and magnitude, the face clearly cannot be reduced to a person’s facial expression. Instead, the face is ‘invisible’ – irreducible to a person’s appearance or representation (TI, 194/168). Precisely because the other defies all fixating representations, it can show itself – ‘express’ itself beyond that which is seen or understood. This expression is a confrontation, because it interrupts our reductive perception and representation of the other (cf. CPP, 20–21).

The other is capable of affecting me in such a fundamental way, because his/her expression consists in putting the *idea of infinity* in me, a finite being (cf. E&I, 91–92/96–97). The idea of infinity, writes Levinas, ‘designates a height and a mobility, a transascendence’ ... it ‘designates a relation with a reality infinitely distant from my own reality’ (TI, 41/11–12). In other words, this move upward towards good-

<sup>17</sup> In TA and TI, Levinas solves the problem of ‘the preservation of the ego in transcendence’ in terms of fecundity. Fecundity introduces a multiplicity and a transcendence in existence. The I is not swept away in transcendence, since the son is not me; and yet I am my son. If the I were swept away, it would fail to transcend itself. The fecundity of the I is its very transcendence. By a total transcendence, the transcendence of trans-substantiation, the I is in the child, an other. Paternity remains a self-identification, but also a distinction within identification – a structure unrecognisable in formal logic (TI, 277/254).

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Burggraeve 2007: 261–263.



ness (ultimately God) does not emanate from within the separated being. This trans-ascendent move is driven by exteriority (TI, 61/33).

The other's appeal therefore arouses in me the idea of God, or the divine. It concerns an idea that has 'penetrated' or been put into me by means of the epiphany of the face, which means that it radically precedes me as origin or initiative. The epiphany 'inflicts' a radical passivity that paralyzes my egotistical preoccupations, and paradoxically enables me to take on my altruistic duty (DVI, 64/106).

The 'taking on' of my altruistic duty is not to be equated with taking initiative. Radical passivity effectively means paralysis that enables ethical action. This action is not the subject's 'doing' but the result of the Other's enabling intervention. The subject of freedom, power and agency no longer exists. This is the subject of egocentric self-absorption and irresponsibility. Face-to-face with the Other, the existent and its immanent preoccupations are made meaningful by virtue of a judgement that arrests its egotistical orientations, pardons it and turns it to goodness, that is, towards its infinite responsibility. Something happens to the subject in face of the Other – an ethical re-definition to be understood as a downward or backward movement, a descent to the underground of the 'I' itself. This brings us to trans-descendence.

### Transcendence and the Dissolution of the Self<sup>19</sup>

Apart from the upward movement of desire for the Other, the subject is also driven inward towards its interiority. It thus triggers 'contraction and interiorization'. Two contradictory dynamics are united in their tension in feeling. This primordial feeling, then, is a dynamism of immanence *par excellence*, thanks to transcendence or the contact with the Other. Paradoxically, this means 'to transcend transcendence towards immanence' (PN, 115–116/171–172). It is only to the extent that subjectivity transcends itself towards the other than itself, that it actually is subjectivity (OS, 76/112). In order to overcome oneself, one's very underground has to be redefined.

This feeling is not that of 'affective warmth', but 'something savage, dense, opaque, dark, blind, bare contact ... with the Other' (PN, 114/170, 116/172). 'To revert to oneself', writes Levinas in AE,

is not to establish oneself at home ... It is to be like a stranger, hunted down even in one's home, contested in one's own identity and one's very poverty ... It is always to empty oneself anew of oneself ... like a hemophilic's hemorrhage. It is to be on the hither side of one's own nuclear unity (AE, 92/117).<sup>20</sup>

Levinas also refers to an 'expulsion' – the subject is expelled, 'without fatherland, already sent back to myself, but without being able to stay there'. This is to be understood as 'an upsurge in me of a responsibility prior to commitment' (AE, 103/130).

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Burggrave 2007: 267–270.

<sup>20</sup> In AE, 114/145, Levinas also refers to 'recurrence' as 'the contracting of the ego', which 'reverts to the hither side of its point of departure', 'gnawing away at this very identity – identity ... in presence of itself – in presence'.

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This commitment is not a conscious pledge, but a passivity of 'an attachment that has *already been made*, as something irreversibly past, prior to all memory and recall' (AE, 104/131, my emphasis). This is 'the passivity of a trauma ... a deafening trauma ... the passivity of being persecuted'. Subjectivity comes to itself, traumatically suffers itself because subjectivity is precisely 'the other in the same' (AE, 111/141, DVI, 83/122). This foreign kernel nestled in the deepest depths of myself – that has always already been there – puts in question all affirmation for oneself (cf. AE, 104/132).

The immanence of the self is characterized by a transcendence that lies deeper than that immanence; or in Kantian terms, the autonomy of the subject is characterized by an irreducible heteronomy that goes deeper than the subject and that is *always already* present and active therein. The idea of Infinity – as something inserted into the subject that was not there before – therefore leads us to discover in the deepest recesses of ourselves something that has *always already* been there – the other in the same (DVI, 65/106).

How can something that is introduced from the outside by the epiphany of the face also, and at the same time, always already be in the deepest interior depths of the self? Following Wahl, Levinas insists upon the ambiguity of transcendence: transcendence opens up the perspective of transcendence, and vice versa. The '*au-delà*' (beyond) is at the same time an '*en-deçà*' (hither side), in the sense that it simultaneously displays a double dynamism of ascending and descending: an unthinkable interchange of high and low, indifferent to hierarchy (OS, 81/119). It is precisely this ambiguity that guarantees the utter incomprehensibility of transcendence as that which is both 'supra-human' and 'infra-human'.

Although never explicitly stated, AE provides ample evidence of the influence of Wahl's idea of transcendence on Levinas's thinking. It is here that Levinas fully develops 'this awakening of the *Same* by the *Other*' as a deafening trauma. It is also here that he explains in repetitive waves of enigmatic verse the 'non-synchronizable diachrony' (AE, 93/118).<sup>21</sup> I cannot evade this encounter, because it is anarchistic – the debt precedes the loan, the responsibility precedes the guilt (AE, 112/143). Something is placed in us that was not there before, *while* forcing us to discover in the depths of the self something that has precisely always already been there. It is *an-archival*. Anarchy does not mean disorder as opposed to order. Anarchy troubles being over and beyond these alternatives. Anarchy is persecution. Obsession as persecution designates an inverted consciousness. This inversion of consciousness is 'a passivity beneath all passivity' (AE, 101/127).

Herewith we are brought back to our initial description of radical passivity, as the subject being passive with regard to *itself*, submitting to itself as though it were an external force. In this sense, ethical agency in Levinas does not follow from a free rational decision, but from an inner force that incapacitates freedom, understood as involuntarily egotistical. In Levinas, then, subjectivity becomes the

<sup>21</sup> Also cf. AE, 122/157: 'There is diachrony: an unbridgeable difference between the Good and me, without simultaneity, odd terms'.



'temple or the theatre of transcendence' (DVI, 76/120) but only at the expense of the very arbitrary freedom that constitutes the ambivalent possibility of truth and error – the freedom that makes us human.

### Conclusion: Ethics as a Liberation from Freedom?

At first sight, then, Levinas's conception of ethical subjectivity as 'the other in the same' (AE, 25/32, 111/142) seems to resemble Kant's understanding of free will. However, as we have seen, Levinas caricatures pre-ethical freedom as uneducable or irreconcilable with necessity. Moral virtue, for Levinas, suggests not a struggle with, but an incapacitation of, pre-ethical freedom. For him, 'the autonomy of our subjective freedom' is ethically irrelevant (Dialogue, 27). Freedom does not precede but derives from heteronomous responsibility.<sup>22</sup> 'Real' freedom, for Levinas, is a liberation from that pre-ethical egoist freedom that cannot but lead me astray.

Certain critical suspicions remain, however. To what extent, for example, does disrupted agency suggest something other than an ability that follows from the inability to follow a different course of action? Does radical passivity not derive its *potentia* or moral force from Levinas's insistence upon an initial non-free freedom, or unfreedom, understood as the existent's involuntary egocentrism? We shall have to assess whether radical passivity in Levinas's scheme is premised on an understanding of freedom as irreconcilable with necessity, whether any moral significance can be attributed to radical passivity, if it does not coincide with at least a minimum of radical freedom, instead of merely incapacitating it. So far, Levinas's thinking has left us with two equally undesirable alternatives: either one chooses for the self and freedom, which necessarily amounts to an absolutized egoism in Levinas's scheme of things, or one chooses for the other – a crushing altruism in which all duties towards the self must necessarily be forsaken.

On the other hand, one might ask oneself whether Levinas has not perhaps discovered the only viable manner of thinking ethical agency in a largely indifferent Western world. In today's narcissistic and anomic world, even brothers desert each other. 'The sober, Cain-like coldness consists in reflecting on responsibility from the standpoint of freedom or according to a contract' (DVI, 71/115). Why does the other concern me? asks Levinas. For him, this question is only relevant and meaningful

if one has already supposed that the ego is concerned only with itself ... In this hypothesis it indeed remains incomprehensible that the absolute outside-of-me, the other, would concern me. But in the "pre-history" of the ego posited for itself speaks a responsibility. The self is through and through a hostage, older than the ego, prior to principles. What is at stake for the self, in its being, is not to be. Beyond egoism and altruism it is the religiosity of the self (AE, 117/149).

<sup>22</sup> In this regard, Levinas enigmatically writes: 'if no one is good voluntarily, no one is enslaved to

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Levinas is convinced that communication or openness towards the other would be impossible 'if it should have begun in the ego, a free subject, to whom every other would be only a limitation that invites war, domination, precaution and information' (AE, 119/151). For him, 'the condition for, or the unconditionality of, the self does not begin in the auto-affection of a sovereign ego that would be, after the event "compassionate" for another'. On the contrary, the responsible ego is only possible in being obsessed by another, in the trauma suffered prior to any auto-identification, in an unrepresentable *before*. For Levinas, 'the violence of non-freedom' is redeemed by the Good (123/158–159) – a sacrifice of freedom for the sake of responsibility, for the little goodness there is in the world, 'even the simple "After you, sir"' (117/149).

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## Chapter 2

### Radical Passivity in Levinas and Merleau-Ponty (Lectures of 1954)

Bettina Bergo

**Abstract** This chapter explores the relationship between Levinas's approach to radical passivity – which grounds intersubjective connections before questions of kinship or the biological metaphors of common blood – and Merleau-Ponty's multiple perspectives on passivity, from that of being caught up in history, to that of somnolence and dreaming, and finally to the delirium staged in Jensen's novel, *Grådiga*, as analysed by Freud. For Levinas, as for Merleau-Ponty, passivity consists of layers and facets; it is not directly thematizable without incurring paradoxes. Yet passivity is a kind of whole, an abyss from which meaning arises. In each case drawing on Husserl's work on passive synthesis, from the consciousness on internal time to association, Levinas and Merleau-Ponty investigate the conditions under which passivity can be approached. They are quite aware that a thematization of passivity reinserts it into intentional consciousness, which reestablishes it in its dualism with activity. Their goal is to evince the phenomenological priority of passivity, before it is set into dualisms of interiority-exteriority, 'man and things' (Merleau-Ponty), individuation-indeterminacy. The other-in-the-same is undergone passively before it is represented; as an ethical *and* in some cases aesthetic phenomenon, it proves *unheimlich* and retro-active; yet the quality of this radical passivity *must* be approached philosophically, in the light of regional ontologies (Merleau-Ponty) and the intersubjective and value sources of what unfolds as ethical life, and thus as an an-archic principle of hope (Levinas). This contribution develops these two approaches to passivity, in their common roots and their ultimate divergence.

I propose to begin with two marginal remarks from Levinas's late work:

The body is neither an obstacle opposed to the soul, nor a tomb that imprisons it, but that by which the self is susceptibility itself. Incarnation is an extreme passivity; to be exposed to sickness, suffering, death, is to be exposed to compassion, and, as a self, to the gift that costs. The oneself is on this side [the inside] of the zero of inertia and nothingness, in deficit of being-in-itself and not in being... The passivity of the self [thus] precedes the voluntary act that ventures toward a project, and even the certainty which in truth is a coinciding with itself. The oneself is on the inside of a coincidence with self (OB, 195 fms 12 and 17, translation modified).