

THE MONADOTHERGY: DISCOVERING TRANSCENDENCE WITH LEIBNIZ AND LEVINAS

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This paper approaches the question of Levinas' relation to philosophy by situating his understanding of transcendence next to that of Leibniz. After offering some preliminary examples, I detail the structure of transcendence in the philosophies of Leibniz and Levinas, focusing on Leibniz's *Principles of Nature and Grace* and Levinas' *Essence and Disinterestedness*. From here, I turn to the question of whether Levinas' thinking can be regarded as moving beyond philosophy as such. I conclude with some thoughts on what it would take for a thinking of transcendence to genuinely move past the manoeuvres characteristic of philosophical thinking.

I. DELINEATION OF THE SCOPE OF INQUIRY

The topic of this essay is the thinking of transcendence in Levinas and Leibniz: How does Levinas think transcendence, and in what ways is this thinking indebted to Leibniz's thinking on the same subject? Its aim is to evaluate the relation of Levinas' thought to philosophy itself. Is Levinas' thinking on the path of philosophy, or does it open up another way of thinking?¹ It is not concerned with Levinas' reading of Leibniz or Leibniz's influence on Levinas' thinking: it is concerned with the way what is thought by both thinkers comes to the fore. In clarifying Levinas and Leibniz's thinking of transcendence, we shall clarify the place of Levinas' thinking with respect to the end of philosophy Levinas speaks of, and thereby shed light on our *own* place with respect to that end.

We shall answer our question primarily in connection with two texts: Leibniz's *Principles of Nature and Grace* and Levinas' 'Essence and Disinterestedness'. Each of these texts, by

design, epitomizes the thinking of its author, and so holds a pre-eminent place within the work of that author: the *Principles of Nature and Grace* provides a succinct and systematic account of the whole of Leibniz's later philosophy; Levinas' 'Essence and Disinterestedness', an overview of his *magnum opus*, *Otherwise than Being*.²

II. PREPARATORY REMARKS ON THE STRUCTURE OF TRANSCENDENCE

To transcend is to cross over. Hence, besides the transcending itself, transcendence connotes what is crossed as well as what crosses.³ Throughout the history of philosophy, the term has meant as much.

The medieval transcendentals – being, one, true, good, etc. – are predicables extending to all beings, able to “traverse the gap” between the different categories to which beings belong.

In the relation between philosophy and theology dominant from the later medieval period through early modernity, the articles of Christian faith transcend the limits of natural reason: they are neither first principles of any natural science nor are they deducible therefrom. Reason – both in the sense of a subjective human faculty and in the sense of the object of rational knowledge – is passed over by truths which are “above” it.

God is a being who transcends the world. Whatever God may be, he is not a world-bound entity, but orders the world from without.

These examples make clear that the notion of transcendence is never far from that of an ordering – in the dual sense of both a commanding and a setting in place. Hence, transcendence is not a mere negation: numbers do not transcend space in a realist ontology of mathematics simply by being non-spatial. Nor is transcendence wholly captured by the simple notion of beyond-ness: what is beyond my field of vision does not thereby transcend it. On the other hand, moral duty may be said to transcend national and racial boundaries, and St. Paul can speak of the

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Christian peace that ‘transcends understanding’ (Phil. 4:7): in each case, the latter is regulated by the former.

Because of this, that which transcends has a quality in tension with that of beyond-ness: it is not utterly absent, but has a manner of presence *in* its very absence. The presence of the transcendent is thus not at odds with distance.

i. The Cartesian itinerary

What these examples fail to capture is the temporality of transcendence itself: what is brought to light in each case is something that stands beyond – what is often referred to as ‘the transcendent’ – and that which it transcends. But ‘transcendence’, from the Latin *transcendens*, a participle equally correctly translated as ‘transcending’, names not a relation, but an occurrence. Hence, it is not wholly captured by the complex relation of ordering from a distance.

A certain primacy in uncovering this temporality must be accorded to Descartes, who extends the heretofore dyadic analysis of transcendence to a triadic one. In Descartes, transcendence is no longer thought as the relation of being above and below holding between the transcendent and the transcended, but now also names a being “in whom” this transcending takes place. Thus, what Levinas calls the ‘Cartesian itinerary’⁴ contains within it a deepening in the understanding of transcendence itself.

In Descartes’ *Meditations*, the terms of this triad are: ego, world, God. God, who stands beyond the world, comes into relation with a being standing before the world as the idea of the infinite within that being. By approaching the infinite being, the *res cogitans* stretches itself beyond the world to the Infinite, and it is in the light of this movement that what is transcended itself becomes intelligible.

It is not accidental that this extension of the analysis of transcendence to a triadic one is accompanied by a deeper analysis of the being of the one who transcends. In the ancient and

medieval analysis of the human being as a rational animal, the human being's ability to go beyond the empirical world to grasp the reasons (*rationes*, λόγοί) of things was what was *distinctive* of the human being; in Descartes' analysis, transcendence is *wholly* constitutive of the being of that being who transcends.⁵

Two fruitful ambiguities are thereby opened up in Descartes' account. The first concerns the nature of the movement enacted in the *cogito*. Analyzed as an *activity*, the *res cogitans* engages in a striving beyond the world toward God as its term. Alternately, the movement may be thought of as 'more passive than all passivity'⁶ – as something that the *me* – now constituted in the accusative – undergoes, finding itself directed without ever having consented to such a directing, with God conceived as the mover and the *me* responding to His elicitation.⁷ As a simplification, we can say Leibniz's thought typifies the former, and Levinas', the latter interpretation.

The second ambiguity lies in the term of transcendence. On the one hand, God is designated as the being beyond the world, by whom the world's being is guaranteed. On the other hand, the *Meditations* specifically and the modern philosophy more generally is not, as medieval philosophy was, primarily oriented *toward* God. Modern philosophy is already secular at its dawning – not in the sense of being godless, but by having the world as its term and focus. Hence, the inquiry into God's existence in *Meditation* III is oriented towards the being of the world in *Meditations* V and VI.⁸

III. TRANSCENDENCE IN LEIBNIZ'S *PRINCIPLES OF NATURE AND GRACE*

Leibniz's *Principles of Nature and Grace* (PNG) follows the aforementioned Cartesian itinerary exactly, and thus outlines an understanding of transcendence, in spite of the word 'transcendence' not itself being used in the text.

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Two transcendental structures are highlighted in the text itself, while a third remains in the background. Behind the text stands Leibniz's attempt to overcome the dichotomy between Lockean atomism and Spinozist Monism towards a fuller and more nuanced understanding of unity and difference.⁹

Within the text stand: first, the knowing subject's passage from the multiplicity of phenomena to the objects grounding them – monads as true unities; and second, the passage from physics to metaphysics. It is this second movement which shall occupy our attention.

Here, we ask three questions. First, how does Leibniz determine the being of the being *who transcends*? Second, of that which is *transcended*? Third, of the *transcendent*? We begin with the first.

i. Transcending monads

The first six paragraphs of the PNG explicate the nature of beings as monads; hence, though Leibniz calls the subject matter of this section of the treatise 'physics' it belongs to what today we would call 'ontology'. Monads are considered first in general,¹⁰ then specially,¹¹ then as a whole.¹² The first part considers successively their existence,¹³ their activity,¹⁴ and their relations,¹⁵ the third of these successively detailing the monad's relation to its own body, its persistence through time, and the relation of its perception to the movement of bodies. The second part considers successively the being of animals¹⁶ and that of souls or spirits,¹⁷ also offering considerations on the distinction between them. The third part transitions to the consideration of monads as a totality, with special focus on the impossibility of their being naturally generated or corrupted.

What is new in Leibniz's *ontology* is that Leibniz thinks thought more originally as a mode of activity.¹⁸ Thinking here is not one kind of activity among others: it is activity itself, as the vacillation between the static representation of things which occurs in the monad (*perception*)

and the movement from one representation to the next (*appetition*).¹⁹ ‘A substance is a being capable of action’:²⁰ in this simple statement, *conatus*, as the self-overcoming of the self, becomes the very being of beings.²¹

ii. *The world transcended*

The movement from ontology to Metaphysics in paragraph 7 can be described in two ways: derivatively, what is overcome is the science of ontology; principally, as becomes clear from the content of the treatise, this is nothing besides the transcending being's intellectual movement past beings, both generally and as a totality, toward God. *World* itself is overcome:

This sufficient reason for the existence of the universe cannot be found in the series of contingent things, that is, in the series of bodies and their representations in souls ... Thus, *the sufficient reason*, which needs no other reason, must be outside this series of contingent things, and must be found in a substance which is its cause, and which is a necessary being, carrying the reason of its existence with itself. Otherwise, we would not have a sufficient reason where one could end the series. And this ultimate reason for things is called *God*.²²

Here, as with Descartes, God is invoked in an inquiry fundamentally oriented toward the being of the world. Hence, after a brief discussion of God's existence and qualities in paragraphs 7-9, the *Principles* returns to the world, emphasizing in paragraphs 10-13 first how knowledge of God reveals new truths about the world as a whole (e.g. that it is the best of all possible worlds); and then in paragraphs 14 to the end of the treatise, how knowledge of God grants access to ethical and spiritual truths about souls in particular.

Leibniz's determination of world is given in the first line of the above quote: the world is the ‘series of contingent things.’ This definition would be taken up and expanded later by Baumgarten, Crusius, and even the young Kant.²³ What is noteworthy about it is that the world

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qua transcended appears as derivative of something else – the individuals of which it is a totality. In Leibniz's thought, this means the world is a totality of monads.

But the question of whether world or the entities comprising it attain relative priority begins to become unstable precisely with Leibniz, for the reason that world enters into the constitution of beings themselves: monads are 'mirrors of the universe'.²⁴ Hence, Leibniz can invoke the essential interconnectedness of monads as a reason against their corruptibility.²⁵

World is also defined relative to God: whereas the world is the complete series of contingents, God is the only being outside of the series.

iii. God as transcendent reason

This leads us to our third question: what is the *term* of transcendence in Leibniz's thought? Recall that the movement of transcendence in the *Principles* can simultaneously be characterized as one from a) physics to metaphysics and b) beings to God. God, as the object of metaphysics, is the term of transcendence. In an early letter to the duchess Sophie of Hanover, Leibniz explicitly identifies metaphysics with natural theology.²⁶ Though in his later work he speaks of metaphysics more broadly as including the study of causes,²⁷ the more restricted identification of metaphysics and natural theology remains present in the structure of the PNG itself. Thus, in its general structure, the movement of the treatise is identical to that followed in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*: from ontology to natural theology.

More than this, Leibniz's transition to metaphysics at paragraph 7 of the treatise begins with a discourse on the utility of the principle of sufficient reason. But Leibniz's use of this term is ambiguous. 'Principle of sufficient reason' names a methodological principle; but 'sufficient reason' also serves as a name of that which grounds by *being* the sufficient reason of all things: God is 'the sufficient reason, which needs no other reason,'²⁸ also known as the 'ultimate reason

for things,'²⁹ or the 'ultimate origination of things.'³⁰ For Leibniz, 'sufficient reason' is a divine name; more than that, it is the principle divine name of Leibnizian theology.

In summary, the movement of transcendence in the PNG is accomplished by a special kind of monad, a rational soul. As ontology, the monadology is groundbreaking in thinking overcoming as the very nature of beings, and pioneering in regarding world as constitutive of, not merely constituted by, beings. In the PNG, the rational monad transcends physics to understand metaphysics. In doing so, it moves from beings through world, analyzed as the ordered series of existent individuals, to God *qua* ultimate reason of all things. By transcending the world to God, the spiritual soul comes to know truths about the world it would not know otherwise, and even comes to recognize its own happiness and eternal good in this movement of discovering reason and truth in God himself.

Note that here, God is not a member of the world. Nor is God analyzed as a being akin to mere objects in the sense that water bottles and hammers are objects, and even Leibniz's remarks on God's kinship with human beings are limited to the traditional affirmation that humans are made in the image of God.³¹ So while world and God are correlative concepts, their manner of correlation is not one of identity or containment. God is affirmed *as* that being who transcends the world, from whom the world totally and each member in it equally receive their reality.

IV. TRANSCENDENCE IN LEVINAS' *ESSENCE AND DISINTERESTEDNESS*

From its opening sentence, the primary concern of Levinas' *Otherwise than Being* is the possibility and significance of transcendence.³² This theme governs Levinas' investigations into other topics such as language, time, and subjectivity. From as early as 'Is Ontology Fundamental?' Levinas thinks transcendence in dialogue with and in opposition to Heidegger, and to a lesser extent, Hegel. But in attempting to find the root of what is problematic in both Hegel and Heidegger's thinking, Levinas must go *beyond* the specifics of their thought to contest

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the ground which nourishes them both. What Levinas identifies as this ground looks remarkably like Leibniz's ontology.³³

Consider what Levinas says in the following passage:

Essence even exerts itself as an invincible persistence in essence, filling every interval of nothingness which would come to interrupt its exertion. *Esse* is *interesse*. Essence is interestedness. Interestedness which does not appear solely to the Spirit surprised by the relativity of its negation and to the man resigned to the insignificance of his death; interestedness which does not reduce solely to this refutation of negativity. Positively, it corroborates itself as the *conatus* of beings. And what else does positivity signify, if not this *conatus*?³⁴

Levinas' analysis of essence in the above passage accomplishes several things. It 1) identifies essence with *conatus*, or force, 2) further identifies force with interestedness, or being-with, and 3) rejects Hegel's and Heidegger's analyses of interestedness/essence as pertaining solely to the *Zeitgeist* or *Dasein* as restrictions of a broader reality present in beings as such. Furthermore, the analysis of *conatus* as pertaining to beings (and not being) brings Levinas closer to Leibniz while distancing his use of the term from its use by Spinoza; and the positive identification of force with the connection of beings into an intersubjective whole recalls Leibniz's understanding of the monad as a mirror of the universe. Levinas' claims about the limited nature of Hegel and Heidegger's analyses, and his corresponding attempt to get to the root of the problem, ensure he will not attack Hegel or Heidegger directly: instead, he attempts to overcome a more fully encompassing philosophy, one strikingly like that found in Leibniz.

Levinas' remarks on the notion of world correspond to his analysis of the being of beings as *conatus* and *interesse*. For Heidegger, the roles of transcending, transcended, and transcendent are filled respectively by *Dasein*, beings, and world.³⁵ Hence, in Levinas' thought, the

overcoming of world is simultaneously the attempt to overcome an account of transcendence that would take world as its term – that is, Heidegger's fundamental ontology. But here again, Levinas faults Heidegger not only for failing to capture the right triadic analysis – Levinas aligns himself with the ordering of the terms of transcendence given by Descartes and Leibniz: self, world, God – but also for failing to adequately capture both the notion of world and the nature of the moving-past-the-object that Heidegger himself calls transcendence (Table 1). In 'Is Ontology Fundamental?' Levinas argues that the overcoming of the object is not primarily delineated by the appearance of world, but 'in the possession and in the consumption of the object.' World is reducible to commerce, exchange, appetite.³⁶

Thus in 'Enigma and Phenomenon', we find Levinas speaking of the 'chain of significations, which constitute the world'³⁷ In 'Essence and Disinterestedness' he claims the difference between beings and world is not as deep as Heidegger would have it, but consists in a 'unity of analogy.'³⁸ And in 'Meaning and Sense' he speaks of world as 'conceived after the model of a context and ultimately after the model of a language and a culture.'³⁹ That Levinas conceives of a language, like a Leibnizian universe, after the model of an inextricable interconnection is made clear in the paragraph immediately following the last quote, when he writes that 'Each word meaning is at the confluence of innumerable semantic rivers.'⁴⁰ World is conceived after the manner of language, which is in turn understood as an interconnected totality where the whole is present in each of its parts.⁴¹

The engagement with Leibniz also appears in Levinas' rejection of the *telos* of a subject that would be essentially intertwined with the world in the manner of a monad – the 'reasonable peace' consequent upon the equilibrium of wills achieved by the pre-established harmony, and exemplified in the Leibniz's notion of human society as a republic with God as its monarch.⁴² Levinas writes:

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Would not essence return to the other of essence by the peace whereby Reason reigns, suspending the immediate clash of beings? ... But this reasonable peace, patience and length of time, is calculation, mediation, and politics. The struggle of all against all – becomes exchange and commerce. The clash where, all against all, are all with all, becomes the reciprocal limitation of matter ... One must now ask whether even the difference which separates essence in war from essence in peace ... does not suppose this breathlessness of spirit, or spirit holding its breath – where the other of essence is thought since Plato. And one must now ask oneself whether this breathlessness, or this reserve might not be the utmost possibility of a spirit bearing the sense of the beyond Essence.⁴³

The above passage shows that for Levinas, like Leibniz⁴⁴ and Heidegger,⁴⁵ the subjectivity of the subject, as ‘bearing the sense of the beyond Essence,’ is determined *as* its relation to the transcendent.⁴⁶ The connection of the reign of Reason with peace as mediation and reciprocal limitation of matter is already present in the Leibnizian notion of matter as passive limit and phenomenal expression of active force,⁴⁷ as is the constantly reiterated return of the self to itself Levinas characterizes as ‘breathlessness of the spirit’. What Levinas argues is derivative is the teleology of a society of subjects individually and collectively oriented by the ideal of Reason, as is Leibniz's ideal⁴⁸ republic.

Put briefly, Levinas' understanding of transcendence accords with that of Leibniz on the following points: the analysis of transcendence as a triadic structure pertaining to self, world, God; the analysis of the selfhood of the self as its relation to the transcendent; the analysis of essence as *conatus*; the identification of conatus with *interesse*, and the corresponding analysis of world as this connection of beings.

i. *The movement from Leibnizianism*

Given these similarities, in what sense are the characteristic positions of Leibniz's philosophy something Levinas seeks to overcome?

A defining characteristic of Levinas' philosophy – doubtless in part in response to Heidegger – is the manner in which it wrests the transcendent, and with it, the being of the being who transcends, from their accord with beings and the world. For Levinas, neither God as wholly other nor the subject constituted by the mark of this other is designated by the term 'being'. Where Leibniz's philosophy attempts a grand synthesis, where all elements – self, God, beings, world – are brought into deep connection with each other, Levinas' sees a Cartesian chasm reopen: the human subject is related to the transcendent as something having left its trace without ever being present to him/her. While the human subject must care for the world and the beings in it, the subject is not determined *as* a relation to being or world, but stands alienated from it.⁴⁹ Levinas' thought depicts a movement wherein the human and the divine other become disassociated from beings and world: the latter retain their Leibnizian signification; the former receive a new meaning by virtue of this wresting. That world should constitute, in whole or in part, the meaning of God or the self, becomes the arch-error Levinas' *oeuvre* works to dispel.

In contrast with the accounts of Descartes, Leibniz, and Heidegger, Levinas' transcendence is not a movement *toward* the transcendent, but from it – even a being ordered *away* from it by it.⁵⁰ God belongs to a past irretrievable as a present. Levinas will even describe the subject's coming to terms with the non-presence of God as a passage from philosophical to religious thinking of the Divine.⁵¹ In short, while the Leibnizian *exitus-redditus* relation of the self to God becomes in Levinas simply an *exitus*, the subject remains, in Levinas an image of the transcendent (Figure 1).⁵²

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We see a corresponding shift in the meaning of the terms which constitute transcendence. In Levinas' thought, that God appear, as it were, “behind” the subject and never before it, ensures the divine other does not appear before the subject as an object of its gaze, either totally or partially. This distinguishes Levinas' thinking of the Divine from that of Buber: the Divine other is not a Thou, but a third (*ille*), and is therefore ‘Outside of the 'thou' and the thematization of an object.’⁵³ God can never appear before the subject as an object, even in the exalted forms of apophatic theology, where the non-appearance of the Deity would be either a defect of vision or a surplus of glory: this is, in Levinas' thinking, a category mistake.⁵⁴ Rather, the Deity resides in a past ‘absolutely diachronic, irrecoverable by memory or history’,⁵⁵ and therefore is recognized ‘as though the invisible who passes from the present were leaving a trace by the very fact of passing from the present.’⁵⁶ Since Levinas identifies being as such with being present at hand – that is, with being an object⁵⁷ – it is clear that this is Levinas' meaning in calling God as transcendent ‘otherwise than being’.

The subject, as the mark of the transcendent, then comes to the recognition of the divinity-as-*ille* in the encounter with the human other. It is in and through this movement of transcendence – no longer an appetitive movement toward the transcendent, but now an encounter with the downtrodden – that the subject becomes a self, and is constituted as a modality not of essence or world,⁵⁸ but of the Good beyond being. The recognition of the trace is, in the first place, the recognition of one's responsibility for the other before the other, and thereby the subject's coming into (out of) being:

The relation with a past on the hither side of every present and everything representable ... is enclosed in the event, extraordinary and quotidian, of my responsibility for the faults and misfortunes of others, in my responsibility responding for the freedom of the other.⁵⁹

Here, the subjectivity of the self stands apart from the relation to a world of beings, and is given its sense from beyond being through the other. As the orientation towards this human other taken up in responsibility, it manifests the simplicity of divine Goodness. This is the sense of transcendence.⁶⁰

V. LEVINAS AND THE PASSING OF PHILOSOPHY

We now return to the question expressing our original aim.

There is a sense in which the question of whether Levinas' thinking counts as philosophy is a mere verbal dispute: whether his thought qualifies as philosophy or not by virtue of its newness would seem to be no different from the question of whether, say, Descartes' philosophy counted as such against the backdrop of pre-modern Aristotelianism. But to suggest the question is arbitrary as such would be to commit to a thesis untenable in the light of Levinas' philosophy: that every possible meaning consists in the positing of an object by an I, 'locat[ing] every meaning in the transcendental inventory it aims to draw up'⁶¹ There is thus a way to answer this question which respects the being of philosophy with and from philosophy itself.

The answer to this question, therefore, cannot come simply by counting differences, either simply or by a weighted sum. Our question is whether what Levinas thinks falls *under* philosophy. Does Levinas' thought give the ground in which philosophy itself is set into its' own, by setting *le dit* back into its origin in *le dire*? Or is it a transient appearance of this very philosophy, self-same through all its manifold manifestations? Put back into the language of philosophy itself, does it speak the *truth* of philosophy – the ownmost of a thinking-of-essence that is not itself such – or the *false* – a mask of that same thinking, that in this strange case deprives itself of its' own power by gnawing at the root giving it drink?

Leibniz and Levinas are iconic thinkers – their thought is not mere personal expression, but emblematic of the matter of thinking itself. In this way, their philosophies are also living

philosophies, bearing the stamp of, and in turn providing support to, a way of being. This is especially interesting with Leibniz, the significance of whose thought, unrecognizable in his own time, has become obvious in ours. The world-as-nexus ontology exemplified in the monadology has been in great part actualized through the advent of technology – the reader need only reach into their pocket and look at their phone to recognize this. Concomitantly, formerly transitive aspects of social life have become strangely reflexive. One no longer talks to friends on social media sites: one “comments” on posts. Speech takes on the character of soliloquy, the reflexive appetition of a constant return of the self to itself, with the interconnectivity of monadic selves simultaneously the condition for their windowlessness.

Levinas' thinking represents to us the negation of all of this. Where Leibniz thinks movement in terms of an appetite drawn toward the *appetibile* – that is, in the light of a *to come* – Levinas thinks the same in terms of a being shook up, pressed from behind, from a past immemorial. Going back to the language of a *philosophia perennis*, we can say both think motion in terms of causality: the former finally, the latter efficiently.⁶² Where Leibniz thinks the human being fully integrated in a divine *système du monde*, Levinas thinks the human as *wrested* from this world, exemplified as a world of equipment. It is as though the world-bound, monadic self is no longer windowless, and those windows are broken in the encounter with the downtrodden – an apocalyptic variation on the monadological theme. Where Leibniz thinks the self oriented by desire toward the rational *as beautiful*, Levinas thinks the self oriented by firm resolve toward the other *in spite of* the beautiful.

In short, in Levinas the matter of thinking has become *monadautrelogical*. The world has been granted the very mode of togetherness Leibniz envisioned for it: in the systematicity of corporate entities, social networks, information databases, the ease of international travel – in short, in the technological management of everyday life. But through this transformation, it has

become clear the subject is not at home in such a world, but aloof and nauseated by it. In the face of the world-as-nexus, the experience of subjectivity becomes one of alienation. It is in light of this lost innocence that the relation to God becomes the faithfulness to one who has passed, present in Levinas' philosophy, but already typified in Freud's analyses of religion.

Herein we find both the appeal and the limit of Levinas' thinking. It symbolizes the necessity of a break with the ontological coordination of systematicity, appetite, and teleology one finds in Leibniz, but does so in ways governed by that very coordination. It insists on the separation of the realm of the human from that of the being of objects. But because being *as such* is identified with the being of objects, the humanity of the human must draw upon, and thereby draw near to, the being of what it rejects in order to define its own essence. This engenders the ambivalence represented, for instance, in the disciplinary separation of the humanities and the sciences, wherein the domain of the humanities is constantly encroached upon by that of the sciences; in the pathology of persons addicted to online gaming, wherein an ever expanding sphere of vitality stands, as it were, on the opposite side of a mirror full entry to which is barred the human being; or even in the present state of mathematical analysis, wherein the reductive aims of the finitist program are regarded as decisively refuted even as aspects of that program continue to govern mathematical practice.⁶³ The sense in which philosophy is the history of the thinking of the being of beings is much broader and more pervasive than our Levinasianism recognizes.

The entire structure of a philosophy is made conspicuous in its treatment of transcendence. While Levinas' thought has rejected the characterization of the relation to the ultimate as an orientation towards a transcendental object, it remains philosophy in holding to much more pervasive patterns of philosophy itself: the characterization of beings in terms of activity (even if this takes on a negative connotation); the characterization of world as a *nexus*

rerum; the constitution of the self as the relation to the transcendent; the recourse to a (singular) transcendent to orient and unify the world in general and humans in particular. It is in this last regard that Levinas remains least extricated from the tradition of philosophy: in the attempt to think the order and unity of beings as derivative upon the order – in this case, the command – of a unifier.

What would it take for us to take up a thinking of the unity of the world not in the terms of a *fiat* or *quod factum est*, but as this unity? Not in the first place derived from an *adequatio*, but as a being-with? Not the atrophied unity of working for a “cause”, staring into the future as though at a movie screen, but as the being-together that gives the thing its thingness? Instead of hastening past the world, might we dare to think, as the psalm does, righteousness looking down from heaven *together with* truth's springing out of the earth? Then, perhaps we might become attentive to a way of thinking that overcomes philosophy *and thereby sets it into its own*, rather than hastening its demise.

¹ This is, of course, a question with which Levinas' work is much occupied. See Emmanuel Levinas, *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1982), pp. 93-127. Hereafter DVI. English translation in Emmanuel Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. & trans. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), pp. 129-148. Hereafter BPW. Cf. Mary-Ann Crumplin, 'Emmanuel Levinas on Onto-theo-logy: Parricide and Atheism' *Heythrop Journal: A Bimonthly Review of Philosophy and Theology* 53 (2012), pp. 100-110.

Translations, where not otherwise indicated, are my own. English translations are provided to the reader for cross-reference.

² This seems to pose a problem for Levinas: in what sense can Levinas' work be said to “overcome” ontological thinking when the very structure of Otherwise than Being, divided as it is into an argument and an exposition of that argument, patently instantiates the cause-effect, potency-act, essence-and-its-derivations structure that he rejects the fundamentality of? Levinas is not unaware of this tension, but seems to regard it as inherent to the inquiry itself. See Emmanuel Levinas, *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974), p. 23. Hereafter AE. BPW, p. 125.

³ A word on my (generally lacking) use of quotation marks. An inquiry into meaning is never in the first place an inquiry into the meaning of a linguistic or eidetic entity, used as a technical device to somehow “grasp” something in the world. A philosophy that contradicts this construes Levinas' analyses in accordance with hermeneutic principles antithetical to his thought.

When quotes are called for, I use double quote marks to indicate phenomenological bracketing, and single quotes to indicate a term's being mentioned rather than used.

⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *Liberté et commandement*. (Saint-Clément-la-Rivière: Fata Morgana, 1994), p. 53. Hereafter LC. BPW, p. 12

⁵ Thus, unlike its ancient and medieval counterparts, the program of Descartes' *Meditations* specifically and that of modern science more generally has an unmistakably practical character: it is a continual movement of humanity, moving towards its object by going past it. Hence, transcendence is not *destroyed* by modern science, but

constitutive of it (cf. DVI, p. 95). This fact provides the condition for the transformation of modern science into technology.

⁶ AE, p. 18 = BPW, p. 121.

⁷ Cf. Thérèse Nadeau-Lacour, 'Levinas, lecteur de Descartes: Ou: *L'idée d'infini* comme événement éthique', *Laval théologique et philosophique* 58 (2002), 155-164 (here pp. 160-162).

⁸ One need only recall Pascal's well-known remark to see that the point was recognized even in Descartes' own time: 'Je ne puis pardonner à Descartes: il aurait bien voulu, dans toute sa philosophie, se pouvoir passer de Dieu ; mais il n'a pu s'empêcher de lui faire donner une chiquenaude, pour mettre le monde en mouvement ; après cela, il n'a plus que faire de Dieu'. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*. In *Œuvres de Blaise Pascal*, vol. 12, Ed. Léon Brunschvicg (Paris: Hachette, 1925), (here, p. 98).

⁹ For Leibniz's views on Spinoza, see his 'Two sects of Naturalists', in In G. W. Leibniz, *Philosophischen Schriften*, ed. C. I. Gerhardt (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1960). 7 vols. (here pp. 332-336). Hereafter G. English translation in G. W. Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays*, ed. & trans. Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989), (here pp. 281-284). Hereafter AG. For a straightforward contrast between monads and atoms, see Leibniz's 'New System of Nature'. in G IV. 477-87, esp. 477-79.

¹⁰ *Principles of Nature and Grace*. In G VI. 597-606. Cited by paragraph number (here par. 1-3) Hereafter PNG.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, par. 4-5.

¹² *Ibid.*, par. 6.

¹³ *Ibid.*, par. 1.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, par. 2.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, par. 3.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, par. 4.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, par. 5.

¹⁸ See my 'Distinguishing Leibniz's system of pre-established harmony from the system of occasional causes' (unpublished); cf. Martin Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 63-81.

¹⁹ PNG, par. 2.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, par. 1.

²¹ *Ibid.* This does not mean that the peculiar manner of transcendence accomplished by the human being – the movement past the world to God – is accomplished by every being. But it does mean that transcendence, in the broader sense of a temporal structure of overcoming, becomes the being of beings. Existence is dynamism. This provides the precondition for the Nietzschean and Bergsonian critique of noetic representation – canonized by Levinas in his understanding of the saying and the said – as a falsification of reality, conceived as duration or becoming.

²² PNG, par. 8 = AG, p. 210, = G VI. p. 602.

²³ See Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, pp. 114-16.

²⁴ See G VI, pp. 182, 328-29; 616 = AG, p. 220.

²⁵ See PNG, par. 6.

²⁶ See G IV, p. 292.

²⁷ See G IV, p. 395.

²⁸ PNG, par. 8 = AG, p. 210 = G VI, p. 602.

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ G VII, p. 302 = AG, p. 149.

³¹ See PNG, par. 14.

³² See AE, p. 3 = BPW, p. 109.

³³ Interestingly, Heidegger also begins his own succinct analysis of transcendence – his 1929 'On the essence of Ground' – in dialogue with Leibniz, arguing that Leibniz's notion of truth as *connexio* is derivative (Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, pp. 100-107). If Heidegger's analysis achieves an essential distance from the matter as Leibniz thinks it, Levinas' engagement with Heidegger may be in an important respect specious; Levinas' thought then, would be *better* understood by being dialectically situated next to that of Leibniz than its more usual antipodes.

³⁴ AE, p. 4 = BPW, pp. 110-111. Cf. G IV, p. 478.

³⁵ See Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, pp. 108-110.

³⁶ BPW, p. 7.

³⁷ BPW, p. 67.

³⁸ AE, p. 4 = BPW, p. 110, alt.

³⁹ BPW, p. 36.

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⁴⁰ BPW, p. 37. Though he usually mentions this analysis in the context of examining the views of others like Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, Levinas makes the thesis his own as a normative account of the nature of language and world. This is presupposed in his attempt to show that not *all* meaning is generated in this manner, i.e. that the encounter with the other is an exception to this rule. See BPW, p. 53.

⁴¹ Cf. Levinas' remarks on the nature of the 'object of culture,' BPW, p. 40.

⁴² See PNG, par. 15.

⁴³ AE, pp. 5-6 = BPW, p. 111, alt; cf. Emmanuel Levinas, *Altérité et Transcendance*. (Saint-Clément-la-Rivière: Fata Morgana, 1995), pp. 142-143. Hereafter AT. BPW, pp. 164-65.

⁴⁴ PNG, par. 14

⁴⁵ Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, pp. 108-111.

⁴⁶ Cf. AE, pp. 17-18; 167-194, passim; DVI, pp. 104-115 = BPW, pp. 135-41.

⁴⁷ See G IV, p. 678; Also, G. W. Leibniz, *Mathematische Schriften*, ed. C. I. Gerhardt (Hildesheim : Georg Olms, 1971), pp. 236-37. Hereafter GM. Cf. Mogens Laerke. 'Five Figures of Folding: Deleuze on Leibniz's Monadological Metaphysics' *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 23 (2015), pp. 1192-1213 (here pp. 1200-1203).

⁴⁸ And therefore, in accordance with the principle of the best, actual.

⁴⁹ See AE, pp. 20-23 = BPW, pp. 123-25.

⁵⁰ Hence, the secularism found in Descartes and Leibniz, where one moves past the infinite back to the world, is exacerbated considerably in Levinas: the infinite is not reached in a movement towards a height which cannot be sustained for the simple reason that there is no movement *toward* the infinite, in the manner of an orientation towards an Aristotelian final cause, at all.

⁵¹ BPW, pp. 66-67.

⁵² This is so even if for Levinas the subject's very subjectivity is not first encountered in a kind of internal experience of one's own subjectivity, but in the face-to-face encounter with another human being. See LC, pp. 58-59 = BPW, p. 14.

⁵³ AE, p. 15 = BPW, p. 119, alt. This further explains why, even if the encounter with the human other and the divine other are always contemporaneous, there is no problem concerning the individuation of these distinct others: the mode of "presence" of the Divine other is wholly other than that of the human other. Cf. Jean-Luc Marion, 'D'Au-trui a l'individu: au-delà de l'éthique', *Studia Phaenomenologica* 2 (2010), pp. 11-30.

⁵⁴ Hence God *qua* transcendent cannot be encountered as an object – that is, something standing opposite the perception of a subject: the orientation of the *soi* towards God is never direct, always oblique. In this basic respect, the work of Jean-Luc Marion cannot be viewed as a continuation of that of Levinas, but remains a more straightforward retrieval of Husserlian phenomenology. Cf. Christina Gschwandtner, 'À dieu' or from the 'Logos'? Emmanuel Levinas and Jean-Luc Marion – Prophets of the Infinite' *Philosophy and Theology* 22 (2010), pp. 177-203.

⁵⁵ AE, p. 12 = BPW, p. 116, alt.

⁵⁶ AE, p. 14 = BPW, 118, alt. There is a play on words in the French, with 'se passer' also having the meaning of 'to pass on', i.e. to do without, to not opt for or not need.

⁵⁷ See BPW, pp. 6-7.

⁵⁸ See AE, pp. 20-23 = BPW, pp. 123-125.

⁵⁹ AE, p. 12 = BPW, p. 117, alt.

⁶⁰ Note here, that though transcendence has a sense, this does not entail that it have a meaning/signification. Levinas associates these latter terms with phenomenological intentionality, which is always the intending of an object. This explains how it is possible for Levinas to thematize transcendence without objectifying it: that is, it explains how Levinas could have written *Otherwise than Being* without undermining his very aim.

⁶¹ BPW, p. 36.

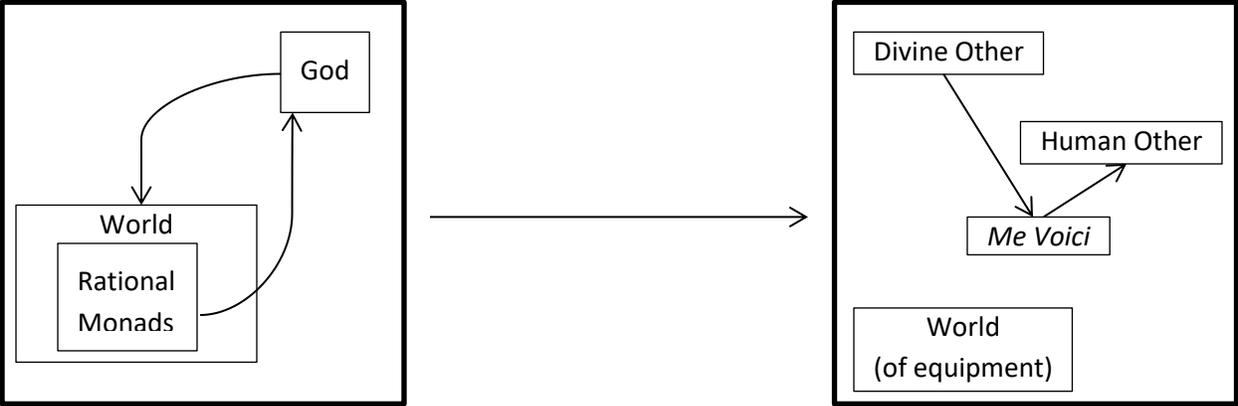
⁶² Herein lies the root of the increasing violence of Levinas' language over time: his language grows more violent in accordance with his deepening this stance.

⁶³ The metaphysical interpretation of the significance of Gödel's incompleteness theorems is that they show that mathematics belongs to the realm of the human, and not merely, as does logic, to the realm of *techne*. It is this metaphysical interpretation that underlies, for instance, the Quinean tendency to regard higher-order logic, because incompact, as set theory in disguise. See W. V. O. Quine, *Philosophy of Logic*, 2nd edn., (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1986), ch. 5. Here, the capacity for grasping the infinite itself is constitutive of the "higher" realm of mathematics vis-a-vis the "lower" realm of mere logic. But in spite of the limiting results of Gödel and others, the very mathematical theories that were shown to be stronger than first-order logic are routinely axiomatized as first-order systems, a double betrayal in that a) the tendency toward formalization as de-semantification arises from suspicion toward the intuition supposedly setting mathematics apart from the realm of mere *techne*; and b) the

specific formalizations of ZF, Peano arithmetic, etc. as *first-order* theories seems to aim at the manageability of these systems *even at the expense* of representing them accurately. For a critique of and alternative to this practice, see John Lake. 'The Approaches to Set Theory' *Notre Dame Journal of Formal Logic* 20 (1979), pp. 415-37.

	Transcending	Transcended	Transcendent
Descartes	<i>Res cogitans</i>	World <i>qua res extensa</i>	God <i>qua ens infinitum</i>
Leibniz	Rational Monad	World <i>qua nexus rerum</i>	God <i>qua</i> Principle of Sufficient Reason
Heidegger	<i>Dasein</i>	Beings	World
Levinas	<i>Me voici</i>	World <i>qua nexus rerum</i> ; world of equipment	God <i>qua</i> wholly Other

Table 1: The structure of transcendence in Descartes, Leibniz, Heidegger, and Levinas



Leibniz

Levinas

Figure 1: Orientation in the movement from Leibnizianism