

Levinas addresses a question (or criticism) very similar to Badiou's in his essay *God and Philosophy* (published in 1975, the ideas put forth were already put forth in different forms in lectures given from 1973-4). In these writings we find Levinas considering the tenability of the inclusion of God within philosophical discourse. It would seem that as soon as we conceptualize God's existence, we must also situate God amidst existence, somehow mysteriously within being's movement. But yet, "in the most unlikely way," God signifies "the beyond being, transcendence." (G&P 1, all future quotes *ibid.*)

Thus, Levinas question is whether we can meaningfully express transcendence: can we "thematize" this radical excess of God's being, or does transcendence delimit sensibility as such? He implies that part of the meaning of the ontological "height" of God's existence is the exclusion of the possibility of an automatically meaningful self-revelation of being:

**"Does not the modality which this adverb ["height"], borrowed from the dimension of the sky over our heads, expresses modify the verbal meaning of the verb 'to be' to the point of excluding it from the thinkable as something inapprehensible, excluding it from the *esse* showing itself, that is, showing itself meaningfully in a theme?"** -*God and Philosophy*

In other words, since the very conception of God is that of the entity *par excellence*, the manner of God's being exceeds the thinkable: God is ontologically out of bounds. Levinas' next move here is worth following closely. He recognizes as a "major tradition of philosophical rationalism" the claim that "the God of the Bible does not have meaning, that is, is not properly speaking thinkable." He cites Mademoiselle Delhomme: 'The concept of God is not a problematical concept; it is not a concept at all.' This, of course, is a very Badiouian sentiment, insofar as it radically separates any conception of God from the philosophical discourse, as inherently and unconditionally irrational.

On the contrary, Levinas argues, without the concept of God we would not have thinking, let alone rationality: this radical ontological surplus we find in the transcendence of God is "among the concepts without which there would be no thought." But the question still remains of the meaning of the word 'God' in the debate. After all, the radical belief implied in religious sentiment still seems to place an almost fascist restriction on critical thought. But, according to Levinas, God exceeds infinitely any possible curtailment of meaning. Indeed, meaning originally founds and manifests itself through a transcendent movement which is the very beginning of signification itself.

Thus Levinas' aims to determine whether the meaning "first broached in presence," the meaning which is equivalent to the *esse* of being, is already a restriction of meaning, "already a derivative or a drifting of meaning." Levinas harbors an intuition that beyond the intelligibility of immanence (the "rationalism of identity, consciousness, the present, and being,") that the "signifyingness" of transcendence can be and is understood, and (in a sense) is understanding itself. Transcendence is both "rationality" and "rationalism", for it precedes and structures both. Indeed, this temporal precedence is critical to Levinas' understanding of transcendence as a meaning which has priority "over and beyond being," whose translation into ontological language Levinas names as the "antecedent" to being. In other words, we can still meaningfully

speaking ontologically of a transcendent being, and we are not necessarily lapsing into blind faith or wild opinion the moment we go beyond rational “terms and beings”:

“In fact, in staying or wanting to be outside of reason, faith and opinion speak the language of being. Nothing is less opposed to ontology than opinion and faith. To ask, as we are trying to do here, if God can be expressed in a rational discourse which would be neither ontology nor faith is implicitly to doubt the formal opposition...between the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, invoked in faith without philosophy, and the god of the philosophers. It is to doubt that this opposition [between the God of Abraham and the god of philosophy] constitutes an alternative.”

This unnecessary alternative has led to a foundational crisis for modern ontology: what has still “not yet reached the threshold of intelligibility” (transcendence) is identical to what appears in the Bible as that which is above and beyond all possible comprehension. Ontology is not necessarily atheistic; in fact, opinion and faith must belong to ontology, if only because they are things that are. Less tautologically, if faith “speaks the language of being” in wanting to stay outside of reason, it must be because being is manifest in opinion and faith: in authentic belief, being is given a voice, a theme, by that ingenious and overflowing thought (the idea of infinity) which, out of rationality, aims at the outside and limit-point of reason.

Thus the very suggestion can only be justified retroactively through an original archaeo-ontological discovery: we can recover a “meaning equivalent to essence” only through the potential of “going back from this allegedly conditioned meaning to a meaning which could no longer be put in terms of being or in terms of beings.” The meaning which is an equivalent to the essence of being cannot be put in terms of many (beings) or one (being); the truth, as for Plato, is suspended in the void between the universal on the one hand and particulars on the other. Meaning is expressed in the participation between the multiple and the singular, enacted in the relationality of existence and existents.

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