

Contributions To Phenomenology 86

Lisa Foran  
Rozemund Uljée *Editors*

# Heidegger, Levinas, Derrida: The Question of Difference

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# Contributions To Phenomenology

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Lisa Foran • Rozemund Uljée  
Editors

# Heidegger, Levinas, Derrida: The Question of Difference

 Springer

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# Introduction: Between Heidegger, Levinas, and Derrida

'I am, I think, I live', means that I am one human being among others in the world, that I am related to nature through my physical body, and that in this body my *cogitationes*, perceptions, memories, judgments etc. are incorporated as psycho-physical facts [...] *The essence of consciousness, in which I live as my own self, is the so-called intentionality.* Consciousness is always consciousness of something.

Edmund Husserl, *The Paris Lectures*.

The seismic shift in the philosophical landscape produced by the work of Edmund Husserl is easily comparable to Immanuel Kant's 'Copernican revolution'. Husserl's phenomenology revolutionised philosophy, producing a turn in thinking that spins on in the work of many of today's thinkers. This turn pivots, in many ways, on the concept of intentionality. Adapted from Brentano's psychological approach, Husserlian intentionality marks the very structure of experience as *relation* and makes the description of that structure the task of philosophy. In this, Husserl's phenomenology escapes solipsism and scepticism to assure itself of a firm ground for knowledge. However, this ground is called into question by the very fact that it is built upon *relation* and thus upon difference. And it is this question of difference which in many senses frames the rich, complex, and elusive relation between Martin Heidegger, Emmanuel Levinas, and Jacques Derrida.

Marrying Husserlian phenomenology with the hermeneutics of Wilhelm Dilthey, Heidegger's magnum opus poses the question of Being and answers with the ontological difference. This primacy of the question as the *hodos* or 'way' of thinking echoes in the work of Levinas, for whom 'one comes not into the world but into question'. Philosophy itself is the 'community of the question' for Derrida. A question presupposes difference: difference between call and response; difference between one and the other; and difference between saying and listening; and so on. Difference, as the condition of the possibility of the question, is thus also the possibility of philosophy itself insofar as the latter begins with the question. But how do these questions of difference pose themselves and multiply themselves between Heidegger, Levinas, and Derrida?



It was to this question that we initially sought a response when we organised a conference ‘Between Heidegger, Levinas and Derrida’ in 2013 in Dublin. While the collection of essays here is far more than a ‘conference proceedings’ and a number of essays herein were not presented at that conference, the project nonetheless took its first steps at that event. We would like to thank the Irish Research Council for its funding and the UCD School of Philosophy for supporting that conference, in particular the then head of school Maria Baghramian.

In compiling this collection, we were faced with the difficult decision of how to order the essays. Any thematic division seemed to limit each individual essay by forcing it to be ‘about’ only one thing. We therefore decided to order them alphabetically by authors’ surnames so that each essay can stand on its own and relate to each other essay in its own way. What all of the essays share, we believe, is a new way to approach the relation between each of the three thinkers.

The collection begins with a challenge to Levinas’s claim that we must leave the ‘climate’ of Heidegger’s philosophy to find an ethics. Ileana Bortun argues that Levinas overlooks the nature of responsibility already found within the Heideggerian structure of Being-with and Dasein-with. Joseph Cohen and Raphael Zagury-Orly investigate the relation between Derrida’s thinking and the tradition of philosophy. Taking ‘the limits of truth’ as a guide word, Cohen and Zagury-Orly follow Derrida’s departure from Heidegger and Levinas through the themes and times of truth, justice, and the impossible. Arthur Cools, in Chap. 3, approaches the relation between Levinas and Derrida from their shared mistrust of metaphorical language. However, ‘skin’ in the work of Levinas and ‘gift’ in that of Derrida, demonstrate the manner in which both thinkers invariably fall back into the metaphorical language they wish to shake off. Paul Ennis investigates the role of death in Heidegger and Derrida, framing his essay through the recent move away from phenomenology in thinkers such as Quentin Meillassoux and Ray Brassier. Ennis argues phenomenology must confront its inevitable defeat by a time which exceeds the human. Lisa Foran returns us to the theme of language in an essay that centres on the possibility of naming. Foran argues that unlike Derrida, Heidegger and Levinas remain trapped in the tradition they wish to escape insofar as they name difference itself.

How philosophy defines itself has been a philosophical pursuit throughout its history. Tziovanis Georgakis in his contribution describes this concern with the enclosure of philosophy as both a farce and a *deus ex machina*. The paradoxical but unavoidable relation between heteronomy and autonomy frames his investigation into this *deus ex machina* as it operates in the work of Heidegger and Derrida. Carlos Gutiérrez begins with the question of how to listen to the other person without destroying their absolute alterity. Tracing otherness from Heidegger to Levinas to Derrida, Gutiérrez offers Hans-Georg Gadamer’s approach as a path between the extremities of the former thinkers; a path along which we might truly *listen* to the other. Sinéad Hogan takes up the work of all three of our thinkers interrogating their relationship through the prism of a graphic, which is to say an aesthetic, intervention. Hogan asks how the line between ‘aesthetics’ and ‘critical thinking’ becomes disrupted in the work of Heidegger and Levinas, via Derrida. Oisín Keohane describes the interrelation between Heidegger’s *Machtlose* and Derrida’s *impou-*

*voir*. François Raffoul explores the Heidegger/Levinas debate on the notion of responsibility. If Heidegger has taught us that Being is *transcendence* pure and simple, Raffoul then questions whether the Other can only be said to lie beyond Being.

The relation between the early Derrida and Heidegger is examined from the concept of time in Rajesh Sampath's contribution. Mauro Senatore traces Derrida's thought of the *usure*, suggesting that it is not only the interpretation of Levinas's metaphysics but also the 'metaphoricity of metaphor' at work in Derrida. Simon Skempton reconceptualises the notion of 'deconstructive personhood' along the lines of the Derridean theme of singularity; arguing that, despite their differences, Heidegger and Levinas share Derrida's concern with the impossibility of making personhood into a present and proper identity. Rozemund Uljée describes the closeness and distance between Heidegger and Derrida in their attempts to think difference in relation to the notion of revelation. Lawrence Vogel investigates the triangular relationship between Heidegger, Martin Buber, and Levinas regarding the notion of intersubjectivity. Vogel argues that each thinker identifies a potentiality he takes to be the defining mark of our humanity itself.

While no work on the relation between Heidegger, Levinas, and Derrida could claim to be complete, we hope that this collection of essays reveals the depth of the relation between them and their continued relevance in and for philosophy today.

Newcastle  
The Netherlands  
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# Substitution and *Mit(da)sein*: An Existential Interpretation of the Responsibility for the Other

Ileana Borțun

**Abstract** This paper challenges Levinas’s thesis that it is necessary to escape Heidegger’s fundamental ontology in order to think ethically. It discusses how Levinas thinks the ethical relationship in *Otherwise than Being*, as “substitution,” as “responsibility for the responsibility of the other,” and it shows that one’s responsibility for the other’s responsibility can also be interpreted existentially, as authentic *Fürsorge*, as care for the other’s care. The “substitution of one for the other” and the “care for the other” are indeed different, but not antithetical. Firstly, Dasein’s authentic existentiell understanding of the other does not reduce him to “the same”, because it does not “reduce” him to the apriori structures of Dasein. Secondly, the equiprimordiality of “Being-with” (*Mitsein*) and “Dasein-with” (*Mitdasein*) – in short, *Mitt(da)sein* – indicates the exposure of one to the other within the factual modes of Being-with-one-another and, therefore, the indebtedness of one to the other for one’s potentiality-for-Being. Consequently, Dasein’s assumed responsibility or authentic care for its potentiality-for-Being is not ego(t)istic, as Levinas contends, but entails caring for the other’s Being, for his unique otherness.

**Keywords** Levinas • Substitution • Heidegger • Mitsein • Mitdasein • Responsibility • Care

## 1 Introduction

It is often considered that Levinas’s powerful critique of Heidegger’s fundamental ontology exposes the inherent limitations of this ontology with regard to ethics; its intrinsic inability to think the otherness of the other and the I as responsible for the other. According to Levinas, the hermeneutics of Dasein, despite its existential character, does not escape the traditional “‘egoism’ of ontology” (Levinas 1969, p. 46) which means both egotism and ethical egoism. In Heidegger’s case, this “egoism” would be epitomized by the interpretation of Dasein’s Being as *care* for (its own)

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Being, given that Dasein, “in its very Being, has this Being as an issue” (Heidegger 1962, p. 104). In other words, Dasein, as existence, has to become itself and therefore always exists within an understanding of (its own) Being and it relates to every being by an understanding of that being’s Being. Levinas considers that *understanding* the other means *knowing* him by subordinating his otherness to a general concept: “Being.” Since “[t]hrough the suppression of the singular, through generalization, knowing is idealism” (Levinas 2011, p. 87), then Heidegger’s ontology seems to be guilty of idealism; of reducing the other to the same, like any other ontology before it. For Levinas, “the same” designates both the sameness implied by the generality of “Being” and the undisturbed identity of the I, who by understanding the other never encounters the other, but just confirms itself in its self-enclosure. Thus, Dasein’s existing “for the sake of itself” (Heidegger 1962, p. 364) appears to be incompatible with existing for the sake of the others.<sup>1</sup>

Although Levinas is not persuaded by Heidegger’s insistence that Dasein’s understanding is more originary than knowledge, his critique employs a fundamental implication of this fact: to understand (the other) is to act (toward the other). Levinas believes that by understanding the other, Dasein not only subordinates the other’s alterity, as “specific difference,” to a genus, but also subjects the other to its spontaneity, its powers. This opens the way for treating the other as if he were an object at one’s disposal, “something” that one could even dispose of by murder.<sup>2</sup>

In response to this ontological oppression of the other, Levinas contests the traditional priority of ontology over ethics and tries to think the ethical relation non-ontologically through the calling into question of one’s spontaneity by the presence of the other human (*l’Autrui*) as the “absolutely other” (*l’absolument Autre*) (Levinas 1969, p. 39). Irreducible to any common denominator, the other cannot be understood, the other is not a phenomenon. The ethical relation is non-reciprocal; it consists in finding oneself infinitely responsible for the other, addressed by the principle “you shall not commit murder” which is “the very signifyingness of the face” of the other (ibid., p. 262) – who “by his face [is]... the manifestation of the height in which God is revealed” (ibid., p. 79). This absolute otherness disrupts sameness; thus, the I gains its singularity: in existing for the other, the I is “no longer reduced to his place within a totality” (ibid., p. 246).

In this paper, I will challenge Levinas’s view that it is *necessary* to escape Heidegger’s phenomenological ontology in order to think ethically. The thesis that through understanding Dasein subordinates the other to a general concept, indicates that Levinas does not fully consider the *existential* character of Heideggerian ontology and its implications, and is therefore improper. I will argue that, if we look

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<sup>1</sup>Levinas explicitly contrasts the responsibility for others with “the concern [i.e. *care* (*souci*)] ‘that existence takes for its very existence’” (Levinas 2011, p. 93), with “the limited and egoist fate of him who is only for-himself” (ibid., p. 116).

<sup>2</sup>In a 1990 “Prefatory Note” to his *Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism* (1934), Levinas affirms his conviction that “the source of the bloody barbarism of National Socialism ... stems from the essential possibility of *elemental Evil* ... which ... is inscribed within the ontology of a being concerned with Being (*de l’être soucieux d’être*)... Such a possibility still threatens the subject correlative with Being ..., that famous subject of transcendental idealism that before all else wishes to be free and thinks itself free” (Levinas 1990, p. 63).

beyond the non-relational aspect of Dasein's individualization, famously emphasized by Heidegger, we can see that fundamental ontology enables us to think the ethical relation precisely as *responsibility* for the other's otherness: for *his own* potentiality-for-Being, *his* individualization. Not only could the existential analytic be the foundation for an ethical theory, but it is in itself ethical.<sup>3</sup> To exist authentically as *Da sein*, as Being-in-the-world, hence as always already Being-with other Daseins; and to inhabit one's *ethos* or unique place; entails an originary ethical relation to oneself and *the others*. That is, it entails an ethical relation to each other in his or her irreducible, albeit not absolute, otherness.

Starting from Derrida's *Violence and Metaphysics* (1964), I will begin by questioning (in section 2) Levinas's tenet that it is possible to find oneself responsible for an other who, completely dissimilar, cannot be understood by analogy with oneself. I will then discuss (in section 3) how Levinas, in answer to Derrida, thinks the ethical relation in *Otherwise than Being* (1974) as "substitution of one for the other" as "responsibility for the responsibility of the other". I will argue that this does entail an understanding of what I and the other have in common (although this understanding is not, for Levinas, existentially grounded): the pre-originary substitution by which I find myself responsible for the other's responsibility involves my (existentiell) understanding of myself *and* the other as responsible beings. This allows us to consider the "responsibility for the responsibility of the other" from an existential perspective.

Surely, by substitution Levinas intends to avoid thinking responsibility starting from one's understanding of the other as another I, because he wants to subvert the egocentric understanding of the ethical agent: "The word *I* means *here I am*, answering for everything and for everyone" (Levinas 2011, p. 114). To be oneself means to be always already responsible for the others. Nevertheless, considering Heidegger's own destruction of the subject, this is similarly true of Dasein (although for different reasons). As I will argue (in section 4), Levinas's thesis that Dasein reduces the other to the same (besides ignoring that Heideggerian Being is not a genus) disregards the fold between the ontological-existential interpretation and the ontic-existentiell understanding. The latter does not thematize the other, does not "reduce" him to the apriori structures of Dasein. Then I will show (in section 5) that the responsibility for the other's responsibility can be interpreted existentially, as *care for the other's care*, and that Dasein's responsibility is not completely opposed to that advocated by Levinas.<sup>4</sup> The existential co-originary (or equiprimordiality) of "Being-with" (*Mitsein*) and "Dasein-with" (*Mitdasein*) – in short, *Mit(da)sein* – indicates the heteronomy of Dasein's self; the *exposure of one to the other* within the factual modes of Being-with-one-another (*Miteinandersein*), so that Dasein is always already responsible also for the other Daseins, not merely for "itself."

<sup>3</sup>It is "ethical" in the pre-theoretical sense of the Greek *ethos*: "abode, dwelling place," used by Heidegger (1993b, pp. 256, 258) when he characterizes the thought of Being as "the originary ethics."

<sup>4</sup>Levinas's "substitution" and Heidegger's authentic "care for" the other or "solicitude" (*Fürsorge*) are different, but not – as Marion (2011, pp. 57–59) argues – diametrically opposed.

## 2 The Other as Other Than Myself

In questioning the thesis of incompatibility between Heidegger's phenomenological ontology and ethics, it is fruitful to start from Derrida's argument regarding Levinas's insistence that the other is not a phenomenon. Derrida observes that my respect for the other's otherness is unthinkable without him *appearing* to me as *other than myself* (Derrida 2001, p. 151). Husserl's argument by analogy from the Fifth Cartesian Meditation does not reduce otherness to sameness: precisely because I cannot attain to the other "immediately and originally, silently, in communion with the other's own experience," the analogical appresentation of the other is "the opposite of victorious assimilation" of the other within the same (ibid., pp. 154–155).

Derrida's analysis suggests that analogy as such has an ethical significance, for it involves the recognition of the difference that prevents the reduction of similarity to sameness. From this perspective, Dasein's (authentic) understanding of the other's Being is indeed a recognition of otherness, if only because it discloses the other as another Being-toward-death. This understanding *lets* the other *be* as he truly is, as an other potentiality-for-Being, irreducible to myself precisely because I cannot die his death, that is, I cannot live his existence toward death, I cannot exist in his "place" (although we co-exist).<sup>5</sup>

However, since "other than myself" means here an alter *Dasein*, any "analogy" (authentic or not) between myself and the other should be interpreted existentially in connection with *Mitsein*. Dasein is primordially Being-with, and not a "primordial ego [that] constitutes the ego who is other for him" (Husserl 1960, p. 119).<sup>6</sup> Dasein does not constitute the "intersubjective" relation but is instead *constituted by it*: *Mitsein* is a constitutive aspect of Dasein's Being, indicating that each Dasein individualizes itself *through* and *within* the factual modes of *Miteinandersein* (existentially interpreted as *Mit(da)sein*). That is why Heidegger says that empathy becomes possible only on the basis of Being-with (1962, pp. 124–125). The primordially of *Mitsein* means that the relation to the other *is not secondary* to the relation to oneself. To be sure, Levinas acknowledges that "for Heidegger intersubjectivity is a coexistence, a *we* prior to the I and the other"; but he considers it a "neutral intersubjectivity," where singularities are erased (Levinas 1969, p. 68). Nevertheless, this reading of *Mitsein* is one version of his improper interpretation of *Sein* as conceptual generality. Actually, singularities are blurred by the domination

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<sup>5</sup>The understanding – or, for later Heidegger, thinking – of Being can be regarded as a recognition of otherness also because it is not a cognition, but a *letting be* of Being: Being is "the other of thought," because "one can have to let be only that which one is not" (Derrida 2001, p. 176). As I argue toward the end of this paper, that is why Dasein's authentic self-understanding, by which it lets itself be its potentiality-for-Being, is not actually a movement of the same.

<sup>6</sup>Heidegger specifically warns us off confusing Dasein "in each case mine" with an ego. *Mineness* (*Jemeinigkeit*) "belongs to any existent Dasein ... as the condition which makes authenticity and inauthenticity possible" (Heidegger 1962, p. [53]). So this "*ontologically* constitutive state" explains also Dasein's everyday and rather inauthentic self-understanding, on which the philosophy of subject actually rests (cf. ibid., pp. [114–115]).

of *das Man* in everyday Being-with-one-another, not by *Mitsein* as such, which – equiprimordially with *Mitdasein* – designates the co-existence of beings who have their Being to be, have to singularize themselves. Anxiety disentangles Dasein from the indefinite “they” only to disclose its being always already *with* the other Daseins and, as I will argue later, *exposed* to them and, therefore, *indebted* to them for its individuality.

Derrida also argues that Levinas’s ethics remains dependent on ontology because its language is ontological (cf. Derrida 2001, pp. 136–146). We find a specific illustration of this in “Is Ontology Fundamental?”, where Levinas writes that ethical thinking is all about

finding the place where the human no longer concerns us from the perspective of the horizon of Being (*l’être*), that is to say, no longer offers itself to our powers. The being (*l’étant*) as such (and not as incarnation of universal Being) can only be in a relation where we speak to this being. The being is the human being and it is as a neighbor that a human being is accessible. (Levinas 1996b/1951, pp. 8/96; tr. mod.)

Thus formulated, Levinas’s project remains within Heidegger’s ontico-ontological difference – given that for Heidegger being is *not* an “incarnation of universal Being,” because Being is *not* a genus but the *disclosure* of beings, and thus Dasein’s Being is, in each case, the Being of a certain human being.<sup>7</sup> In thinking the “[human] being as such,” the ontological is still entailed. As I will argue later, such an entailment *does not* preclude the ethical relation: when Dasein is authentic, it speaks *to* the other, not *about* the other, namely it does not thematize the other Dasein, it does not “reduce” him to “Dasein.”

### 3 The Substitution of One for the Other

In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas responds to Derrida by developing the distinction between *the Saying*, which is ethical as one’s passive and direct exposure to the other; and *the Said*, the ontological thematization that is ultimately inscribed in any philosophical discourse (Levinas 2011, pp. 5–6).<sup>8</sup> In *writing about* the ethical relation, the Said is unavoidable. But Levinas fights the Said’s tendency to annihilate the Saying, by deconstructing it from within. “Substitution” is most illustrative of this endeavor.

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<sup>7</sup>Being “is no class or genus of beings; yet it pertains to every being. Its ‘universality’ is to be sought higher up”; “Being is the *transcendens*,” i.e. it is not to be found among beings; yet it is not divorced from them. Most importantly, the transcendence of *Dasein’s* Being “implies the possibility and the necessity of the most radical *individuation*” (Heidegger 1962, p. [38]). — Since Being is not a “first being,” Heidegger’s ontology is not a “first philosophy.” Accordingly, it is highly problematic to conflate it with traditional ontology, as Levinas does. On this point, see for example Derrida 2001, pp. 170–171, and Raffoul 2005, pp. 144–145.

<sup>8</sup>This distinction is meant “to surpass the ontological difference by ethics” (Marion 2005, p. 313): the Saying is pre-originary to the Said, in whose amphibology Levinas (2011, p. 6) locates the ontological difference.