

ON ESCAPE

De l'évasion

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other, through the advances and retreats of a meditation compelled to open its own path by forging its own language,⁸⁶ the course of a single reflection is sketched, one devoted to the task of thinking by limiting itself to a single thought.⁸⁷ This is a faithfulness that defines what continues to hold the name “philosophy.” That it should nevertheless have taken close to forty years and several books—which were not just intermediaries designed to go from one to the other, in order that the last one could keep the promise latent in the first one—allows, in its turn, a second dimension of the work of Levinas’s philosophy to appear, one that marks it as the exercise of the longest patience.

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ON ESCAPE

I

The revolt of traditional philosophy against the idea of being originates in the discord between human freedom and the brutal fact of being that assaults this freedom. The conflict from which the revolt arises opposes man to the world, not man to himself. The simplicity of the subject lies beyond the struggles that tear it apart and that, within man, set the “I” [*moi*] against the “non-I” [*non-moi*]. These struggles do not break up the unity of the “I,” which—when purified of all that is not authentically human in it—is given to peace with itself, completes itself, closes on and rests upon itself.

Despite its heroic conception of human destiny, the romanticism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries does not deviate from this ideal of peace. The individual is called upon to loosen the grasp of the foreign reality [*réalité étrangère*] that chokes it, but this is in order to assure the full flowering of its

own reality. Only the struggle with the obstacle is open to the heroism of the individual; this struggle is turned toward the stranger [*l'étranger*]. No one is more proud than Rousseau or Byron; no one is more self-sufficient.

This conception of the "I" [*moi*] as self-sufficient is one of the essential marks of the bourgeois spirit and its philosophy. As sufficiency for the petit bourgeois, this conception of the "I" nonetheless nourishes the audacious dreams of a restless and enterprising capitalism. This conception presides over capitalism's work ethic, its cult of initiative and discovery, which aims less at reconciling man with himself than at securing for him the unknowns of time and things. The bourgeois admits no inner division [*déchirement intérieur*] and would be ashamed to lack confidence in himself, but he is concerned about reality and the future, for they threaten to break up the uncontested equilibrium of the present where he holds sway [*où il possède*]. He is essentially conservative, but there is a worried conservatism. The bourgeois is concerned with business matters and science as a defense against things and all that is unforeseeable in them. His instinct for possession is an instinct for integration, and his imperialism is a search for security. He would like to cast the white mantle of his "internal peace" over the antagonism that opposes him to the world. His lack of scruples is the shameful form of his tranquil conscience. Yet, prosaically materialistic [*médiocrement matérialiste*], he prefers the certainty of tomorrow to today's enjoyments. He demands guarantees in the present against the future, which introduces unknowns into those solved problems from which he lives. What he possesses becomes capital, carrying interest or insurance against risks, and his future, thus tamed, is integrated in this way with his past.

Yet this category of sufficiency is conceived in the image of *being* such as things offer it to us. They *are*. Their essence and

their properties can be imperfect; the very fact of being is placed beyond the distinction between the perfect and the imperfect. The brutality of its assertion [that of the fact of being] is absolutely sufficient and refers to nothing else. Being is: there is nothing to add to this assertion as long as we envision in a being only its existence. This reference to oneself is precisely what one states when one speaks of the identity of being. Identity is not a property of being, and it could not consist in the resemblance between properties that, in themselves, suppose identity. Rather, it expresses the sufficiency of the fact of being, whose absolute and definitive character no one, it seems, could place in doubt.

And Western philosophy, in effect, has never gone beyond this. In combating the tendency to ontologize [*ontologisme*], when it did combat it, Western philosophy struggled for a better being, for a harmony between us and the world, or for the perfection of our own being. Its ideal of peace and equilibrium presupposed the sufficiency of being. The insufficiency of the human condition has never been understood otherwise than as a limitation of being, without our ever having envisaged the meaning of "finite being." The transcendence of these limits, communion with the infinite being, remained philosophy's sole preoccupation ...¹

And yet modern sensibility wrestles with problems that indicate, perhaps for the first time, the abandonment of this concern with transcendence. As if it had the certainty that the idea of the limit could not apply to the *existence* of what is, but only, uniquely, to its *nature*, and as if modern sensibility perceived in being a defect still more profound. The *escape*, in regard to which contemporary literature manifests a strange disquiet, appears like a condemnation—the most radical one—of the philosophy of being by our generation.

This term *escape*, which we borrow from the language of contemporary literary criticism, is not only a word à la mode; it is world-weariness, the disorder of our time [*mal du siècle*]. It is not easy to draw up a list of all the situations in modern life in which it shows itself. They were created in an age that leaves no one in the margins of life, and in which no one has the power to slip by himself unaware [*passer à côté de soi*]. What is caught up in the incomprehensible mechanism of the universal order is no longer the individual who does not yet belong to himself, but an autonomous person who, on the solid terrain he has conquered, feels liable to be mobilized—in every sense of the term.² Put into question, this person acquires the poignant consciousness of a final reality for which a sacrifice is asked of him. Temporal existence takes on the inexpressible flavor of the absolute. The elementary truth that *there is being*—a being that has value and weight—is revealed at a depth that measures its brutality and its seriousness. The pleasant game of life ceases to be just a game. It is not that the sufferings with which life threatens us render it displeasing; rather it is because the ground of suffering consists of the impossibility of interrupting it, and of an acute feeling of being held fast [*rivé*]. The impossibility of getting out of the game and of giving back to things their toy-like uselessness heralds the precise instant at which infancy comes to an end, and defines the very notion of seriousness. What counts, then, in all this experience of being, is the discovery not of a new characteristic of our existence, but of its very fact, of the permanent quality [*l'inamovibilité*]³ itself of our presence [see Rolland's Annotation 1].

Yet this revelation of being—and all it entails that is weighty and, in some sense, definitive—is at the same time the experience of a revolt. Such a revolt no longer has anything in common with what opposed the "I" to the "non-I." For the be-

ing of the "non-I" collided with our freedom, but in so doing it highlighted the exercise of that freedom. The being of the I [*moi*], which war and war's aftermath have allowed us to know, leaves us with no further games [*plus aucun jeu*]. The need to be right, or justified [*d'en avoir raison*], in this game can only be a need for escape.

Escape does not originate only from the dream of the poet who sought to evade "lower realities"; nor does it arise from the concern to break with the social conventions and constraints that falsified or annihilated our personality, as in the romantic movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Escaping is the quest for the marvelous, which is liable to break up the somnolence of our bourgeois existence. However, it does not consist in freeing ourselves from the degrading types of servitude imposed on us by the blind mechanism of our bodies, for this is not the only possible identification between man and the nature that inspires horror in him. All these motifs are but variations on a theme whose depth they are incapable of equaling. They hold this theme within but transpose it. For these motifs do not yet place being in question, and they obey the need to transcend the limits of finite being. They translate the horror of a certain *definition* of our being but not that of being as such. The flight they command is a search for refuge. It is not only a matter of getting out [*sortir*], but also of going somewhere. On the contrary, the need for escape is found to be absolutely identical at every juncture [*point d'arrêt*] to which its adventure leads it as need; it is as though the path it traveled could not lessen its dissatisfaction.

Yet the need to escape could not be confused with the life force or the creative evolution [*devenir créateur*], which, according to a famous description, in no way fixes its ends in advance but creates them instead. Does the created being not be-

come a burden, qua event inscribed in a destiny, for its creator? It is precisely from all that is weighty in being that escaping sets forth. It is true that the continuous renewal of the vital urge breaks out of the prison of a present time that, scarcely actual, already becomes past, and that creation never stops with the approval of its work; but it is nonetheless the case that within the vital urge renewal is interpreted as creation and thereby denotes subservience [*asservissement*] to being. While it breaks with the rigidity of classical being, the philosophy of the vital urge does not free itself from the mystique [*prestige*] of being, for beyond the real it glimpses only the activity that creates it. It is as though the true means of surpassing the real were to consist in approximating an activity that ended up precisely with the real.

For fundamentally, becoming is not the opposite of being. The propensity toward the future and the "out-ahead-of-one-self" contained in the vital urge mark a being destined for a race-course [*voué à une course*] [see Rolland's Annotation 2]. The urge is creative but irresistible. The fulfillment of a destiny is the stigma of being: the destination is not wholly traced out, but its fulfillment is fatal, inevitable. One is at the crossroads, but one must choose. We have embarked. With the vital urge we are going toward the unknown, but we are going somewhere, whereas with escape we aspire only to get out [*sortir*]. It is this category of getting out, assimilable neither to renovation nor to creation, that we must grasp in all its purity. It is an inimitable theme that invites us to get out of being. A quest for the way out, this is in no sense a nostalgia for death because death is not an exit, just as it is not a solution. The ground of this theme is constituted—if one will pardon the neologism—by the need for *excedence*.⁴ Thus, to the need for escape, being appears not only as an obstacle that free thought would have to

surmount, nor even as the rigidity that, by inviting us to routine, demands an effort toward originality; rather it appears as an imprisonment from which one must get out.

Existence is an absolute that is asserted without reference to anything else. It is identity. But in this reference to himself [*soi-même*],⁵ man perceives a type of duality. His identity with himself loses the character of a logical or tautological form; it takes on a dramatic form, as we will demonstrate. In the identity of the I [*moi*], the identity of being reveals its nature as enchainment, for it appears in the form of suffering and invites us to escape. Thus, escape is the need to get out of oneself, that is, *to break that most radical and unalterably binding of chains, the fact that the I [moi] is oneself [soi-même]*.

Escaping therefore has little in common with that need for "innumerable lives," which is an analogous motif in modern literature, albeit totally different in its intentions. The I that wants to get out of itself [*soi-même*] does not flee itself as a limited being. It is not the fact that life is the choice and, consequently, the sacrifice of numerous possibilities that will never be realized that incites us to escape. The need for a universal or infinite existence allowing for the realization of multiple possibilities supposes a peace become real at the depths of the I, that is, the acceptance of being. Escape, on the contrary, puts in question precisely this alleged peace-with-self, since it aspires to break the chains of the I to the self [*du moi à soi*]. It is being itself or the "one-self" from which escape flees, and in no wise being's limitation. In escape the I flees itself, not in opposition to the infinity of what it is not or of what it will not become, but rather due to the very fact that it is or that it becomes. Its preoccupations go beyond the distinction of the finite and the infinite—notions, after all, that could not apply to the fact of being itself but only to its powers and properties. The ego has

only the brutality of its existence in sight, which does not pose the question of infinity.

Therefore, the need for escape—whether filled with chimerical hopes or not, no matter!—leads us into the heart of philosophy. It allows us to renew the ancient problem of being qua being. What is the structure of this pure being? Does it have the universality Aristotle conferred on it? Is it the ground and the limit of our preoccupations, as certain modern philosophers would have it? On the contrary, is it nothing else than the mark of a certain civilization, firmly established in the fait accompli of being and incapable of getting out of it? And, in these conditions, is *excedence* possible, and how would it be accomplished? What is the ideal of happiness and human dignity that it promises [see Rolland's Annotation 3]?

II

Yet is the need for escape not the exclusive matter of a finite being? Does this being not aspire to cross the limits of being rather than to flee being as being? Would an infinite being have the need to take leave of itself? Is this infinite being not precisely the ideal of self-sufficiency and the promise of eternal contentment?

That would suppose that need is just a privation. Perhaps we shall manage to show that there is in need something other than a lack. Moreover, the notions of the finite and the infinite apply only to *that which is*; they lack precision when applied to *the being* of that which is. *That which is* necessarily possesses a greater or lesser range of possibilities, over which it is master. Properties can have relations with other properties and be measured against an ideal of perfection. The very fact of exist-

ing refers only to itself. It is that through which all powers and all properties are posited. The escape we envisage should look to us like the inner structure of this fact of self-positing [*le fait de se poser*]. We will attempt to discover escape in a state of affairs where the fact of self-positing is laid bare, freed from any consideration of natures, qualities, or powers that are posited and that mask the event through which they *are*. But how shall we take account of the finite or the infinite in the fact of positing? Is there a more or less perfect manner of being posited? What is, is. The fact of being is always already perfect. It is already inscribed in the absolute. That there might have been a birth or a death in no way affects the absolute character of an assertion that refers only to itself. This is why we believe that the problem of the origin and death could not be judiciously posed until the analysis of escape was completed. In this introduction, we shall not lose interest in that thematic. Moreover, escape will not appear to us as a flight toward death or as a stepping outside of time. We will reserve for another study the demonstration of the ontologicistic character⁶ of nothingness and eternity.

In the meantime, it is worth our while to describe the structure of need. After what we have just said about the notion of being, it is clear that even if the ground of need were to consist in a lack, then this lack could not affect the "existence of the existent," to which one can neither add nor remove anything. In reality, need is intimately tied to being, but not in the quality of privation. On the contrary, need will allow us to discover, not a limitation of that being that desires to surpass its limits in order to enrich and fulfill itself, but rather the purity of the fact of being, which already looks like an escape.

The essential work of this study is devoted to that analysis.

III

In the first place, need seems to aspire only to its own satisfaction. The search for satisfaction becomes the search for the object able to procure it. Need thus turns us toward something other than ourselves. Therefore, it appears upon initial analysis like an insufficiency in our being, impelled to seek refuge in something other than itself. An insufficiency habitually interpreted as a lack, it would indicate some weakness of our human constitution, or the limitation of our being. The malaise by which need begins and which somehow innervates or animates it—even when it attains only a moderate intensity—would be the affective translation of this finitude. Likewise, the pleasure of satisfaction would express the reestablishment of a natural plenitude.

And yet this whole psychology of need is a bit hasty. It too quickly interprets the insufficiency of need as an insufficiency of being. Thus it assumes a metaphysics in which need is characterized in advance as an emptiness in a world where the real is identified with the full. That is an identification that threatens any thinking that could not distinguish between existence and the existent, all thinking that applies to the one what should instead have meaning for the other.

Need becomes imperious only when it becomes suffering. And the specific mode of suffering that characterizes need is malaise, or disquiet.

Malaise is not a purely passive state, resting upon itself. The fact of being ill at ease [*mal à son aise*] is essentially dynamic. It appears as a refusal to remain in place, as an effort to get out of an unbearable situation. What constitutes its particular character, however, is the indeterminacy of the goal that this departure sets for itself, which should be seen as a positive

characteristic. It is an attempt to get out without knowing where one is going, and this ignorance qualifies the very essence of this attempt.

There are needs for which the consciousness of a well-determined object—susceptible of satisfying those needs—is lacking. The needs that we do not lightly call “intimate” remain at the stage of a malaise, which is surmounted in a state closer to deliverance than to satisfaction.

To be sure, it is not usually this way. But only extrinsic experiences and lessons can give to need the knowledge of the object liable to satisfy it, just as they add ideas about the need’s value. Therefore, the increasing specialization of needs and the consciousness of their objects, which itself grows clearer and clearer, more and more refined, develop only as a function of learning and education. However unreflective this consciousness may be, it is the consciousness of objects; it places our being under the tutelage of what is outside of us. The whole problem consists in knowing whether the fundamental preoccupation with need is thereby explained, whether the satisfaction of need responds precisely to the disquiet of malaise.

Now, the suffering of need in no way indicates a lack to be filled; this suffering does not expose us as finite beings. The being that has not satisfied its needs dies. But this indisputable statement has an extrinsic origin. In itself, need does not foreshadow the end. It clings fiercely to the present, which then appears at the threshold of a possible future. One heartrending need is the despair over a death that does not come.

Moreover, the satisfaction of a need does not destroy it. Not only are needs reborn, but disappointment also follows their satisfaction. We are in no way neglecting the fact that satisfaction appeases need. However, it is a matter of knowing whether this ideal of peace lies within the initial demands of

need itself. We note in the phenomenon of malaise a different and perhaps superior demand: a kind of dead weight in the depths of our being, whose satisfaction does not manage to rid us of it.

What gives the human condition all its importance is precisely this inadequacy of satisfaction to need. The justification of certain ascetic tendencies lies there: the mortifications of fasting are not only agreeable to God; they bring us closer to the situation that is the fundamental event of our being: the need for escape.

We are thus moving toward the thesis of the inadequacy of satisfaction to need. The analysis of the satisfaction of need and of the atmosphere in which it is brought about will lead us to attribute to need a type of insufficiency to which satisfaction could never respond.

IV

To justify our thesis that need expresses the presence of our being and not its deficiency, we must look at the primordial phenomenon of need's satisfaction: pleasure.

It is certainly not to the materiality of the objects liable to satisfy need that he who feels it is oriented. Their possible use alone interests him. But there is more to this. Satisfaction is fulfilled in an atmosphere of fever and exaltation, which allows us to say that need is a search for pleasure. What does this pleasure signify?

The moralists' contempt for pleasure is matched only by the attraction it exerts upon human beings. And yet within pleasure's specific dynamism—likewise unknown to the moralists, who present it as a state—the satisfaction of need comes

to pass. But another game unfolds around the process that results in need's appeasement, one that philosophers deprecate as mere accompaniment but that human beings take seriously.

Pleasure appears as it develops. It is neither there as a whole, nor does it happen all at once. And furthermore, it will never be whole or integral. Progressive movement is a characteristic trait of this phenomenon, which is by no means a simple state. This is a movement that does not tend toward a goal, for it has no end. It exists wholly in the enlargement of its own amplitude, which is like the rarefaction of our existence [*être*], or its swooning. In the very depths of incipient pleasure there opens something like abysses, ever deeper, into which our existence, no longer resisting, hurls itself. There is something dizzying to pleasure's unfolding [*devenir*]. There is ease or cowardice. The [human] being feels its substance somehow draining from it; it grows lighter, as if drunk, and disperses.

Pleasure is, in effect, nothing less than a concentration in the instant. Aristippus's hedonism is chimerical because he allows for an indivisible present, possessed in pleasure. But it is precisely the instant that is split up in pleasure. It loses its solidity and its consistency, and each of its parts is enriched with new potentialities for swooning as the ecstasy intensifies. The magnitude of the force alone measures the intensity of pleasure; pain is concentration. The instant is not recaptured until the moment when pleasure is broken, after the supreme break, when the [human] being believed in complete ecstasy but was completely disappointed, and is entirely disappointed and ashamed to find himself again existing.

We therefore note in pleasure an abandonment, a loss of oneself, a getting out of oneself, an ecstasy: so many traits that describe the promise of escape contained in pleasure's essence. Far from appearing like a passive state, pleasure opens a di-

mension in the satisfaction of need in which malaise glimpses an escape. Therefore, need is not a nostalgia for being; it is the liberation from being, since the movement of pleasure is precisely the loosening of the malaise.

Moreover, the very fact that the satisfaction of need is accompanied by an affective event reveals the true meaning of need. There is no simple *act* that could fill the lack announced in need. In effect, the simple act presupposes a constituted being; it is not the affirmation itself of that being. Affectivity, on the contrary, is foreign to notions that apply to that which is, and has never been reducible to categories of thought and activity.

Aristotle had an acute sense of pleasure's foreignness to activity. Yet it is not true that pleasure is added to the act, "like the flower to youth," for this rather unsuggestive image reduces pleasure to the level of a state; it conceals the movement of pleasure in which satisfaction comes to pass and with it the promise of escape that it brings to the malaise of need. It is nevertheless fair to say that pleasure is not the goal of need, for pleasure is not an end [*terme*]. Pleasure is a process; it is the process of departing from being [*processus de sortie de l'être*]. Its affective nature is not only the expression or the sign of this getting-out; it is the getting out itself. Pleasure is affectivity, precisely because it does not take on the forms of being, but rather attempts to break these up. Yet it is a deceptive escape.

For it is an escape that fails. If, like a process that is far from closing up on itself, pleasure appears in a constant surpassing of oneself, it breaks just at the moment where it seems to get out absolutely. It develops with an increase in promises, which become richer the closer it comes to its paroxysm, but these promises are never kept.

Thus antiquity's notion of mixed pleasures contains a great part of truth. It is not the fact of being conditioned by need

and mixed with pain that compromises its purity. In itself, on a strictly affective level, pleasure is disappointment and deceit. It is not disappointment through the role it plays in life, or through its destructive effects, or even through its moral indignity, but rather through its internal unfolding [*devenir interne*].

Pleasure conforms to the demands of need but is incapable of equaling them. And, at the moment of its disappointment, which should have been that of its triumph, the meaning of its failure is underscored by shame [see Rolland's Annotation 4].

V

On first analysis, shame appears to be reserved for phenomena of a moral order: one feels ashamed for having acted badly, for having deviated from the norm. It is the representation we form of ourselves as diminished beings with which we are pained to identify. Yet shame's whole intensity, everything it contains that stings us, consists precisely in our inability not to identify with this being who is already foreign to us and whose motives for acting we can no longer comprehend.

This first description, albeit superficial, reveals to us that shame is more attached to the being of our I than it is to its finitude. Shame does not depend—as we might believe—on the limitation of our being, inasmuch as it is liable to sin [*susceptible de péché*], but rather on the very being of our being, on its incapacity to break with itself. Shame is founded upon the solidarity of our being, which obliges us to claim responsibility for ourselves.

Nevertheless, this analysis of shame is insufficient, for it presents shame as a function of a determinate act, a morally bad act. It is important that we free shame from this condition.

Shame arises each time we are unable to make others forget [*faire oublier*] our basic nudity. It is related to everything we would like to hide and that we cannot bury or cover up. The timid man who is all arms and legs is ultimately incapable of covering the nakedness of his physical presence with his moral person. Poverty is not a vice, but it is shameful because, like the beggar's rags, it shows up the nakedness of an existence incapable of hiding itself. This preoccupation with dressing to hide ourselves concerns every manifestation of our lives, our acts, and our thoughts. We accede to the world through words, and we want them to be noble. It is the great merit of Céline's *Journey to the End of the Night*, thanks to a marvelous flair for language, to have undressed the universe in a sad and desperate cynicism.

In shameful nakedness, what is thus in question is not only the body's nakedness. However, it is not by pure chance that, under the poignant form of modesty, shame is primarily connected to our body. For what is the meaning of shameful nakedness? It is this that one seeks to hide from the others, but also from oneself. This aspect of shame is often ignored. We see in shame its social aspect; we forget that its deepest manifestations are an eminently personal matter. If shame is present, it means that we cannot hide what we should like to hide. The necessity of fleeing, in order to hide oneself, is put in check by the impossibility of fleeing oneself. What appears in shame is thus precisely the fact of being riveted to oneself, the radical impossibility of fleeing oneself to hide from oneself, the unalterably binding presence of the I to itself [*du moi à soi-même*] [see Roland's Annotation 5]. Nakedness is shameful when it is the sheer visibility [*patence*] of our being, of its ultimate intimacy. And the nakedness of our body is not that of a material thing,

antithesis of spirit, but the nakedness of our total being in all its fullness and solidity, of its most brutal expression of which we could not fail to take note. The whistle that Charlie Chaplin swallows in *City Lights* triggers the scandal of the brutal presence of his being; it works like a recording device, which betrays the discrete manifestations of a presence that Charlie's legendary tramp costume barely dissimulates. When the body loses this character of intimacy, this character of the existence of a self, it ceases to become shameful. Consider the naked body of the boxer. The nakedness of the music hall dancer, who exhibits herself—to whatever effect desired by the impresario—is not necessarily the mark of a shameless being, for her body appears to her with that exteriority to self that serves as a form of cover. Being naked is not a question of wearing clothes.

It is therefore our intimacy, that is, our presence to ourselves, that is shameful. It reveals not our nothingness but rather the totality of our existence. Nakedness is the need to excuse one's existence. Shame is, in the last analysis, an existence that seeks excuses. What shame discovers [*découvre*] is the being who *uncovers* himself [*se découvre*].

Thus modesty penetrates need, which has already appeared to us as the very malaise of being and, at bottom, as the fundamental category of existence. And modesty does not leave need once the latter is satisfied.⁷ The being who has gorged himself falls back into the agonizing disappointment of his shameful intimacy, for he finds himself anew after the vanity of his pleasure.

However, to defend the thesis according to which being is, at bottom, a weight for itself, we must focus still more closely on the phenomenon of malaise.

VI

Let us analyze a case in which the nature of malaise appears in all its purity and to which the word "malaise" applies par excellence: nausea.⁸ The state of nausea that precedes vomiting, and from which vomiting will deliver us, encloses us on all sides. Yet it does not come from outside to confine us. We are revolted from the inside; our depths smother beneath ourselves; our innards "heave" [*nous avons "mal au cœur"*].

When considered in the instant in which it is lived and in the atmosphere that surrounds it, this revolting presence of ourselves to ourselves appears insurmountable. Yet in the conflict and duality thus suggested between us and the nauseated state, we could not qualify the latter as an obstacle. That image would falsify and impoverish the true state of things. The obstacle is outside the effort that surpasses it. When the obstacle is insurmountable, this characteristic is added to its nature qua obstacle, but it does not modify this nature, just as our sentiment of its immensity removes nothing from the object's externality. We can still turn away from it. Nausea, on the contrary, sticks to us. Yet it would not be correct to say that nausea is an obstacle that we cannot dodge. That would again be to maintain a duality between us and it, leaving aside a *sui generis* implication that characterizes this duality and to which we will return.

There is in nausea a refusal to remain there, an effort to get out. Yet this effort is always already characterized as desperate: in any case, it is so for any attempt to act or to think. And this despair, this fact of being riveted, constitutes all the anxiety of nausea. In nausea—which amounts to an impossibility of being what one is—we are at the same time riveted to ourselves, enclosed in a tight circle that smothers. We are there, and there

is nothing more to be done, or anything to add to this fact that we have been entirely delivered up, that everything is consumed: *this is the very experience of pure being*, which we have promised from the beginning of this work. However, this "nothing-more-to-be-done" is the mark of a limit-situation in which the uselessness of any action is precisely the sign of the supreme instant from which we can only depart. The experience of pure being is at the same time the experience of its internal antagonism and of the escape that foists itself on us.

Nevertheless, death is not the exit toward which escape thrusts us. Death can only appear to it if escape reflects upon itself. As such, nausea discovers only the nakedness of being in its plenitude and in its utterly binding presence.

This is why nausea is shameful in a particularly significant form. It is not only shameful because it threatens to offend social conventions. The social aspect of shame is fainter in nausea, and all the shameful manifestations of our body, than it is in any morally wrong act. The shameful manifestations of our bodies compromise us in a manner totally different than does the lie or dishonesty. The fault consists not in the lack of propriety but almost in the very fact of having a body, of being there [see Rolland's Annotation 6]. In nausea, shame appears purified of any admixture of collective representations. When nausea is experienced in solitude, its compromising character, far from effacing itself, appears in all its originality. The sick person in isolation, who "was taken ill" [*s'est trouvé mal*] and who has no choice but to vomit, is still "scandalized" by himself. The presence of another is even desired, to a certain degree, for it allows the scandal of nausea to be brought down to the level of an "illness," of a fact that is socially normal and can be treated, and in regard to which one can consequently adopt an objective attitude [see Rolland's Annotation 7]. The phe-

nomenon of shame of a self confronted with itself, discussed above, is the same as nausea.

But is nausea not a fact of consciousness, which the I knows as one of its states? Is this *existence* itself, or only an *existent*? In so asking, we forget the sui generis implication that constitutes nausea, which allows us to see in it the fulfillment of the very being of the entity that we are [*l'accomplissement de l'être même de l'étant que nous sommes*]. For what constitutes the relationship between nausea and us is nausea itself. The binding, or irremissible, quality of nausea constitutes its very ground. Despair over this ineluctable presence constitutes the presence itself. Thereby, nausea posits itself not only as something absolute, but as the very act of self-positing: it is the affirmation itself of being. It refers only to itself, is closed to all the rest, without windows onto other things. Nausea carries its center of attraction within itself. And the ground of this position consists in impotence before its own reality, which nevertheless constitutes that reality itself. Therefore, one might say, nausea reveals to us the presence of being in all its impotence, which constitutes this presence as such. It is the impotence of pure being, in all its nakedness. Therefore, ultimately, nausea also appears as a fact of consciousness that is "exceptional." If, in every psychological fact, the existence of the fact of consciousness gets confused with its knowledge, if the conscious fact is known by way of its existence, nevertheless its nature does not merge with its presence. On the other hand, the nature of nausea is nothing other than its presence, nothing other than our powerlessness to take leave of that presence.

VII

It thus appears that at the root of need there is not a lack of being but, on the contrary, a plenitude of being. Need is not oriented toward the complete fulfillment of a limited being, toward satisfaction, but toward release and escape. Hence, to assume an infinite being [*un être infini*] that would have no need is a *contradictio in adjecto*. The experience that reveals to us the presence of being as such, the pure existence of being, is an experience of its powerlessness, the source of all need. That powerlessness therefore appears neither as a limit to being nor as the expression of a finite being. The "imperfection" of being does not appear as identical to its limitation. Being is "imperfect" inasmuch as it is being, and not inasmuch as it is finite. If, by the finitude of a being, we understand the fact that it is a burden to itself and that it aspires to escape, then the notion of finite being is a tautology. Being is thus essentially finite [see Rolland's Annotation 8].

The banal observation that man is by birth engaged in an existence he neither willed nor chose must not be limited to the case of man as a finite being. He translates the structure of being itself. The fact of beginning to exist is not a matter of inevitability, for inevitability obviously already presupposes existence. The entry into existence did not vex some will, since in that case the existence of that will would have come before itself [*aurait préexisté à son existence*]. And yet the feeling of the brutality of existence is not some mere illusion of a finite being that, taking stock of itself, would measure the fact of its existence by the faculties and powers it possesses qua already existing. If these powers and faculties appear to it as essentially limited, then their limitation belongs to an order other than that

of the brutality of existence. That limitation could only be fundamentally foreign to the plane where a will can collide with obstacles or be subject to tyranny. For limitation is the mark of the existence of the existent.⁹ This weight of the being that is crushed by itself, which we revealed in the phenomenon of malaise, this condemnation to be oneself, can also be seen in the dialectical impossibility of conceiving the beginning of being—that is, of grasping the moment where being takes up this weight—and of being nevertheless driven back to the problem of one's origin. It is not that this origin is incomprehensible because it emerged from nothingness, contrary to the rules of fabrication, for it is absurd to postulate, among the conditions of being, those of a work that presupposes it as already constituted. To set behind being a creator who is also conceived as a being also fails to posit the beginning of being outside the conditions of an already constituted being.¹⁰ It is in the being that begins—not in its relations with its cause—that we find the paradox of a being that begins to be, or, in other words, the impossibility of distinguishing, in this being, what takes on the weight [of being] from that weight itself. This difficulty does not disappear with the demise of the prejudice according to which being was preceded by nothingness.

Henri Bergson has shown that to think nothingness is to think of being as crossed out.¹¹ And it seems to us incontestable that nothingness is the work of a thinking essentially turned toward being. But thereby we get no solution to the problem that lies elsewhere: Is being sufficient unto itself? The problem of the origin of being is not the problem of its proceeding out of nothingness, but that of its sufficiency or insufficiency. This problem is dictated by all that is revolting in the positing of being.

Moreover, the paradox of being remains intact when we free ourselves of time and grant ourselves eternity. We will re-

serve the problem of eternity for a later study, which will have to sketch the philosophy of escape. But let us say straightaway that it is not in view of eternity that escape is made. Eternity is just the intensification, or radicalization, of the fatality of that being, which is riveted to itself [*lui-même*]. And there is a deep truth in the myth that says that eternity weighs heavily upon the immortal gods [see Rolland's Annotation 9].

VIII

And yet progress has not brought Western philosophy to surpass being entirely. When it discovered, beyond things, the realms of the ideal, of consciousness, and of becoming—our first model of being—it was incapable of denying these realms an existence, since the benefit of its discovery consisted precisely in making them be. Ontologism in its broadest meaning remained the fundamental dogma of all thought. Despite all its subtlety, it remained prisoner of an elementary and simple principle, according to which one could think and feel only that which exists or is supposed to exist. A principle more imperious than that of non-contradiction, since here nothingness itself—to the degree that thinking encounters it—gets clothed with existence, and so we must without restriction state, against Parmenides, that non-being is.

Perhaps making a distinction between the form and the matter of thinking will allow us to escape an accusation that utterly burdens thinking with an absurdity. Is the positing [*position*] contained in all theoretical thought not distinct from the assertion of being? Does the pure form of an object—which everything that thinking thinks must take on—already transform this matter into a being? However that may be, the form of the object is conceived on the model of being, and the affirmation of possible existence is contained in the copula. The ob-

ject is a possibility of existence, and whatever the difficulty in attributing a possible existence to nothingness, the attachment of thought to being is unshakable [*indefectible*].

Moreover, contemplative thought, or theory, is at bottom the behavior of him who forever carries the mark [*stigmata*] of existence: theory is essentially subservient to the existent and, when it does not start from being, it anticipates it. This is the powerlessness before the *fait accompli*. Knowledge [*connaissance*] is precisely that which remains to be done when everything is completed.

The behavior of the creature, confined in the *fait accompli* of creation, did not remain outside of attempts at escaping. The urge toward the Creator expressed a taking leave of being. But philosophy either applied the category of being to God or contemplated him as the Creator, as though one could surpass being by approaching an activity or by imitating a work that led precisely to being. The romanticism of creative activity is animated by the profound need to get out of being, yet all the same it shows an attachment to its created essence and its eyes are fixed on being. For this romanticism, the problem of God has remained that of his existence [see Rolland's Annotation 10].

In this universality of being for thought and for action resides traditional idealism's impotence before the persistent return of a doctrine that rightly recalls the fundamental attachment to being of the thinking whose task was to surpass it. In its opposition to realism, the idealism of thought modifies the structure of the existent but does not tackle its existence. Thought cannot say anything about this and leaves the task of interpreting existence to all those who ask only not to go beyond being [*qui ne demandent qu'à ne pas aller*]. The emancipation of idealism in regard to being is based upon its under-valuation. Consequently, at the very moment when idealism

imagines it has surpassed being, it is invaded by being from all sides. Those intellectual relations into which idealism dissolved the universe are no less its existences—neither inert nor opaque, to be sure—and they do not escape the laws of being. Idealism is exposed not only to the attacks of all who charge it with sacrificing sensuous reality and with ignoring or scorning the concrete and poignant demands of human beings prey to their everyday problems. Consequently, idealism is charged with being unable to command and to guide. But it does not even have the excuse of escaping from being. Indeed, at the level to which it leads us, idealism finds being—in a subtler form, one that beckons us to a false serenity—always the same, having relinquished none of its characteristics.

And yet the value of European civilization consists incontestably in the aspirations of idealism, if not in its path: in its primary inspiration idealism seeks to surpass being. Every civilization that accepts being—with the tragic despair it contains and the crimes it justifies—merits the name "barbarian" [see Rolland's Annotation 11].

Consequently, the only path open for us to satisfy idealism's legitimate demands without nevertheless entering into its erring ways is that on which we measure without fear all the weight of being and its universality. It is the path where we recognize the inanity of acts and thoughts incapable of taking the place of an event that breaks up existence in the very accomplishment of its existence. Such deeds and thoughts must not conceal from us, then, the originality of escape. It is a matter of getting out of being by a new path, at the risk of overturning certain notions that to common sense and the wisdom of the nations seemed the most evident [see Rolland's Annotation 12].

philosophy!" exclaimed Levinas in 1956 (cf. "On Maurice Blanchot," in *Proper Names*, trans. Michael B. Smith [Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1996], p. 127; translation modified). For everyone, perhaps, but not for him who will have held this name [philosophy] with an attitude that it would be a fundamental error to consider conservative. By way of demonstration, I cite the last words of a conversation Levinas had with Richard Kearney:

It is true that philosophy, in its traditional form as onto-theology and logocentrism—to use terms from Heidegger and Derrida—has reached a limit. But it is not true in the sense of philosophical speculation and critical questioning. The speculative exercises of philosophy are in no sense ready to end. In effect, the entire contemporary discourse on metaphysics is much more speculative than metaphysics itself. Reason is never more volatile than when it places itself in question. In the contemporary end of philosophy, philosophy has found its own vitality.

Richard Kearney, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers: The Phenomenological Heritage. Paul Ricoeur, Emmanuel Levinas, Herbert Marcuse, Stanislas Breton, Jacques Derrida* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984).

ON ESCAPE

1. Levinas ends the sentence with an ellipsis to indicate that the ongoing concern of philosophy with transcendence will be interrupted, here, historically and, as it were, syntactically. The beginning of the following paragraph announces the interruption, which is none other than the possible end of discourses on infinite being, brought about by the "modern sensibility" in philosophy and elsewhere. —Trans.

2. The substantive *inamovibilité* is one of several metaphors used by Levinas that are borrowed from a juridical vocabulary. The term refers precisely to the quality of certain magistrates and judges, who can be neither displaced from, nor deprived of, their functions without exceptional procedures. —Trans.

3. In the original text the verbs "fix" and "create" are in the plural; they are the actions of both the vital urge and the creative becoming. The French permits an *inclusive* disjunction (either a, or b, or both) with the use of the conjunction "ou", thus: "l'élan vital ou le devenir créateur, qui . . . ne se fixent nullement d'avance leur terme . . ." —Trans.

4. The word is modeled upon "trans-scendence," adjoining "ex-" or "out" to the Latin *scandere*, "to climb". —Trans.

5. The usual French formulation is *dans cette référence à lui-même, l'homme* ["in this reference to himself, man . . ."], but here Levinas is emphasizing the *one-self* such that the phrase should read literally: "in this reference to oneself, man . . ." The oneself refers to the self of fatigue, sensibility, affectivity, which accompanies our reflective consciousness sometimes like a weight. Levinas develops this theme in 1940 in EE. The *soi-même* receives emphasis as vulnerability and suffering in OB. —Trans.

6. Levinas deliberately writes *caractère ontologiste* here, and not *caractère ontologique*. "Ontologiste" is an adjective carrying a certain irony, which could be translated as relative-to-ontology or ontologies, rather than relative to being or existence. This is an oblique reference to Heidegger's discussion of nothing [*Nichts*]; see *Being and Time*, § 40, pp. 228–35 and § 57, pp. 319–25. —Trans.

7. By dint of the play of gendered articles, Levinas here creates a sort of pun that reads both as: "Prudish modesty [*elle*] does not leave need [*il, le*] once the latter is satisfied" and as: "She does not leave him when he is satisfied." This is all the more comical since we are talking about the endurance of modesty in the intimacy of nakedness. —Trans.

8. Sartre's novel by this title first appeared in December 1938, published by Gallimard. The present essay dates from 1935. Also see the remarks in EE on nausea contrasted with horror (p. 96/61). —Trans.

9. The French text reads: "Elle ne saurait qu'être foncièrement étrangère au plan même où une volonté peut se heurter à des obstacles ou subir une tyrannie. Car elle est la marque de l'existence de l'existant." The feminine pronoun "elle" appears to refer to the

brutality of existence ("la brutalité de l'existence," both nouns being feminine). Ambiguity arises because in the previous sentence "limitation" is also a feminine noun, and it is typical of *human existence* to encounter obstacles and limitations. But given what preceded this, brutality is, for Levinas, the proper mark of *existence itself*, or of being, because by essence "being is finite" and a "burden to itself" in its powerlessness. —Trans.

10. The French reads: "Placer derrière l'être le créateur, conçu à son tour comme un être, ce n'est pas non plus poser le commencement de l'être en dehors des conditions de l'être déjà constitué." Levinas is enumerating two cases where the problem of origin is highlighted by the contradiction implicit in defining the beginning of being—whether as event or as creation—as a function of a preexisting cause or of some being that preexists the emergence of being itself. He is looking, as he will say, for a paradox rather than a contradiction. The paradox is illuminated by the phenomenon of nausea, where being, which is always already weighty or grave, becomes oppressed by itself, smothered in itself. —Trans.

11. Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, "The Idea of 'Nothing,'" trans. Arthur Mitchell (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1975). In this chapter, first published separately in the *Revue philosophique* (November 1906), Bergson offers what will later be, for Levinas, one path of criticism of Heidegger's philosophy of being. Bergson writes, "Existence appears to me like a conquest over naught [nothingness]. I say to myself that there might be, that indeed there ought to be, nothing, and I then wonder that there is something. Or I represent all reality extended on nothing as on a carpet: at first it was nothing, and being has come to superaddition to it. Or, yet again, if something has always existed, nothing must always have served as its substratum or receptacle, and is therefore eternally prior." But this idea of nothing is, he writes, "a pseudo-idea." He adds, a bit further on, "In a word, whether it be a void of matter or a void of consciousness, *the representation of the void is always a representation which is full and which resolves itself on analysis into two positive elements: the idea, distinct or confused, of a*

substitution, and the feeling, experienced or imagined, of a desire or a regret" (pp. 276–77, 283, author's emphasis). —Trans.

ANNOTATIONS

1. For the text of *Paix et Droit*, see M. Absensour and C. Chalier, eds., *Cahier de l'Herne: Levinas*, no. 60.

2. *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Seán Hand (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990).

3. See *Noms propres*, p. 64/45 for the citations on this page.

4. "From the Carefree Deficiency to the New Meaning," in *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, p. 88/46.

5. *Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, trans. André Orianne (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1995). —Trans.

See note 8 in the introduction and summary that Jean Hering gave of this work of Levinas, in the same issue of the *Revue philosophique* in which Levinas published "Martin Heidegger and Ontology."

6. Levinas, "Transcendence and Evil," first published in the journal *Le Nouveau Commerce* 41 (Autumn 1978), 55–78; see p. 73. [*Collected Philosophical Papers: Levinas*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1993; rpt. Pittsburgh, Penn.: Duquesne University Press, 1998), pp. 175–86. The present translation appeared in *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, p. 134. —Trans.]

7. Maurice Blanchot, *L'écriture du désastre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), p. 40 [*The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986, 1995) —Trans.].

8. See OB, p. 187n5 (English translation).

9. The expression is "percer le fond du ciel"; it is found in *Ma mère*, in Bataille, *Ceuvres complètes*, vol. 4 (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), p. 269. *My Mother*, trans. Austryn Wainhouse (London: Cape, 1972), pp. 129–30. —Trans.

10. Rolland follows Levinas in hyphenating the term "disaster" in such a way that its meaning approaches the idea of a loss of the guiding star, or magnetic north (i.e., *dés-astre*). Contemporary dis-

aster is precisely the loss of a *κοσμος*, understood as an order and an Aristotelian hierarchy of being whose imitation was the art of human existing for the Greeks. For Levinas, following Blanchot and his concept of *désastre*, the loss of a fixed point of orientation in the modern age only reveals more clearly the nature of being in its active, verbal self-positing and its anonymous, “dis-heartening hubbub.” Also note Levinas’s cogent remark from 1976, “For the confluence of philosophical and ethical discourses to be convincing, however, for the order of what has come . . . to be called nature, in its cold splendor or in its scientific and astronomic legality, to take on a meaning for man recognized in his disaster, a response must be given to the problem of death.” “On Death in the Thought of Ernst Bloch,” in *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, p. 35. —Trans.

11. Bataille, *Ma mère*, p. 276/137.

12. *Ibid.*

13. See Bataille, *Madame Edwarda* in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 3, p. 31. [*My Mother; Madame Edwarda; and The Dead Man; With Essays by Yukio Mishima and Ken Hollings*, trans. Austryn Wainhouse (London: Marion Boyars, 1989, 1995). —Trans.]

14. Hegel writes there, “[Self-consciousness] plunges into life and indulges to the full the pure individuality in which it appears. It does not so much make its own happiness as straightway take it and enjoy it. . . . Its action is only in one respect an action of *désire*. It does not aim at the destruction of objective being in its entirety, but only at the form of its otherness or its independence. . . .” See *Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), §§ 361–62, p. 218. —Trans.

15. *TI*, pp. 4–5.

16. Levinas, “La mauvaise conscience et l’inexorable,” first published in French in the journal *Exercices de la patience*, no. 2 (Winter 1981), p. 112. [“Bad Conscience and the Inexorable,” in *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, p. 176. —Trans.]

17. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the*

Greeks, trans. Marianne Cowan (South Bend, Ind.: Gateway, 1962), §4.

18. “Bad Conscience and the Inexorable,” in *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, pp. 174–75.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 175.

20. *Was ist Metaphysik?* 32–33/68/59 [p. 103].

21. See *Recherches philosophiques*, vol. 4 (1934–1935), pp. 392–95.

22. “A Dieu” is a salutation that implies “I commend you to God’s care.” It carries a finality comparable to the English “farewell.” The reference to God also contains an abstract directionality and a dative sense, “unto God.” —Trans.

23. “Hermeneutics and Beyond,” in *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, pp. 109–10.

24. “Philosophie et positivité,” in *Savoir, faire espérer: Les limites de la raison* (Brussels: Facultés Universitaires Saint-Louis, 1976), p. 197.

25. See “Philosophie et l’idée de l’infini,” which first appeared in *Revue de métaphysique et morale*, no. 3 (Paris: Colin, 1957). Reprinted in *En découvrant l’existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*, p. 166. [“Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite,” in *Discovering Existence with Husserl*, ed. Richard A. Cohen, trans. Michael B. Smith (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1998). —Trans.]

26. *Paix et Droit*, no. 4 (1935), pp. 6–7.

27. Levinas, *Difficile liberté: Essais sur le judaïsme* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1976, 2d ed.) p. 302. [*Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Seán Hand (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University, 1990), p. 233. —Trans.]

28. In these sentences the transitive verb “entendre” and the reflexive “s’entendre” mean, respectively, to understand one another to the point of agreement, and to understand in the sense of hearing the meaning. The root *tendere* means to stretch or move toward something; *attendre* and *entendre*, which ran together in Old French, entail, as Rolland knows, the sense of “to turn one’s ear, to give auditory attention.” In the present case, common sense is rooted in agreement and the understanding based on hearing one

another. Levinas's extensive discussion of "pro-phetism," employed both in a hyphenated and an unhyphenated form, as what encourages speech (*pro-phansis*) and the speaking of ethical fraternity, is like the other side of hearing qua understanding. —Trans.

29. Rolland is playing on the contrast between the West as the land of the evening sun and the East as the land of the morning sun or sunrise. To go to the extreme point in the East would be to venture all the way to the site of the first sunrise. When he says that we are not going astray in a middle East, he does not mean in *today's* Middle East, which is "Moyen Orient" in French, whereas Rolland writes, "Orient moyen." —Trans.

30. *Humanisme de l'autre homme*, p. 96.

Cultural Memory in the Present

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ON ESCAPE

De l'évasion

Emmanuel Levinas

Translated by Bettina Bergo

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Annotations

Jacques Rolland

1. This dimension of existence, perceived in the sentiment of being riveted, in that of being's nonremittable obligation or of its nonremovable quality, has been traced back, in the introduction, to its probable philosophical origin, the Heideggerian notion of *Geworfenheit*. But the reflection on the body leads us to wonder, nevertheless, whether it might not have yet another origin: Jewishness—in the sense in which Nazi anti-Semitism was able brutally to unveil, during these years, its precisely nonremittable quality. We must return to this. We are thinking of an article Levinas published in 1935, in issue number 8 of the journal of the Alliance Israélite Universelle, *Paix et Droit*: "The Religious Inspiration of the Alliance."¹ We might note the following few sentences: "Hitlerism is the greatest trial—an incomparable trial—through which Judaism has had to pass. . . . The pathetic destiny of being Jewish becomes a fatality. One can no longer flee it. The Jew is ineluctably riveted to his Judaism" (p. 4). A youth "definitively attached to the sufferings

and joys of the nations to which it belongs . . . discovers in the reality of Hitlerism all the gravity of being Jewish"; "In the barbarous and primitive symbol of race . . . Hitler recalled that one does not desert Judaism."

The language of these sentences cannot fail to strike us by its similarity with that used by "On Escape" to state the manner by which the existent is compelled to its existence. Coming from a man who will later emphasize the prephilosophical experiences that are the sap from which philosophical reflection is nourished, this expression of a "prephilosophical experience," fundamental at the least, of the trauma provoked by the first manifestations of racial anti-Semitism, cannot fail to keep us alert.

We have noted in the introduction that "On Escape" could be understood as an essay "in the hermeneutics of facticity," tarrying at the level of *Geworfenheit* and, by virtue of this pause [*cet arrêt*], diverging from the course pursued by the Heideggerian meditation. Why this pause? A single response is possible: because it allows us to grasp (or at least to advance toward) the meaning of existence in its totality, just as, in Heidegger, it is the opposition between *Geworfenheit* and *Entwurf* [thrownness and projecting] that sets us en route toward this understanding. Yet in order that *Geworfenheit*, or the fact of being riveted to an existence one has not chosen, appear as the unsurpassable ground and, thence, the ultimate meaning of existence such as this ontology alone can understand it, *it is necessary that existence assert itself as Geworfenheit*, in the fatality of being-riveted to that which one cannot desert. Might one not think, then, that it is the brutal revelation of being-Jewish, as being-riveted-to-Judaism as to that which one cannot desert, that has led to thinking being-human as such as being-riveted-to-being in all the gravity of the fact of being, and to elaborat-

ing that thought philosophically while tarrying, in description, at the “moment” of *Geworfenheit*? (But being-riveted-to-Judaism is not identified with that for which it would be the model here, i.e., being-riveted-to-being; for it is election in a positive sense, that is, as service, but thereby already an ethical deliverance relative to being understood as a “race course” [*course*]. This was indicated already in a text just subsequent to the period we are concerned with here, “The Spiritual Essence of Anti-Semitism According to Jacques Maritain,” published in *Paix et Droit* [issue 5], in 1938 [pp. 3–4]. Thus, “Foreign to the world, the Jew would be its ferment; he would awaken it from its torpor, he would communicate to it his own impatience and concern over the good.” The compulsion, like tension, does not have here being as its object, but rather the Good, that is, as the later work will teach us, that which, beyond being, is *better* than being.)

This does not amount, in our mind, to losing ourselves in anecdotes. These reflections refer instead to a thinking that is present at the depths of the collection of “Essays on Judaism,” entitled *Difficult Freedom*.² This is a thinking according to which being-Jewish—the fact that something like this could exist in the world and not only in the gaze of the anti-Semite, as Sartre would have it, but rather according to its own modalities—is not itself an empirical fact but rather constitutes a structure of mind and meaning, “an extreme possibility, of impossibility” of human existence as such. This is a possibility that means the “break with the naïveté of the herald, the messenger, or the shepherd of being of an *ethical* humanity.” In his last years, Levinas spoke of this in terms of the possibility of the seated man. He did not mean thereby what Nietzsche detested in Flaubert, but rather the story of Jacob, who, unlike Esau, “the man who knew hunting,” became a “complete man” who “lived in tents,” where he sat to study the Book and to invent,

before its time, the famous *Lernen* (cf. Genesis 25:27). But, on the basis of this “structural” interpretation of being-Jewish, anti-Semitism itself and the judeocide to which it led in this past century also cease to be merely empirical facts.³

2. Though this passage in its entirety clearly refers to Bergson, in this sentence the presence of Heidegger, for whom *Dasein* is defined precisely by its being-out-ahead-of-oneself, is just as undeniable. What thus becomes altogether interesting is the equivalence established through the sentence’s phrasing, between being-out-ahead-of-oneself and being-devoted-to-a-race-course. This equivalence refers us to recent texts where Levinas takes with radical seriousness the obligation to be [*l’astiction à être*] that characterizes the *Dasein* and that amounts to a “reduction of the human to the task of being.” “The essence of being or *being-in-question* is in question in the being-there as *having-to-be*, which is the being of man. *Man is*: this is equivalent to man *has* to be. The ‘property’ indicated in the *having* [*avoir*] of the having-to-be [*de l’avoir-à-être*] measures all that which is irrecusable—irrecusable *to the point of dying*—in the strict obligation to be, included in the *to* of the *to be*.”⁴ But from there we can also see the (surprising) proximity of the *Dasein* understood this way to Spinoza’s *conatus essendi*. The latter term reappears frequently in Levinas’s recent texts. It designates the strain on the self, the race toward this self out-ahead of oneself, the “epic of being” of a being persevering in its being, when the latter is no longer defined as “actual essence” but rather dynamically, as *having-to-be* or as the task of being.

3. We did not pause in the introduction over the contents of this series of questions, but were satisfied simply to signal their importance. We must do so here, briefly.

—Universality will be effectively accredited to being (far-