

OF THINGS FACE-TO-FACE WITH LEVINAS FACE-TO-FACE WITH HEIDEGGER PROLEGOMENA TO A METAPHYSICAL ETHICS OF THINGS

Silvia Benso

Things are everywhere. They fill the world with their presence. Whereas it is possible to avoid the Other (person) to reject the encounter, to be solipsistic without condensation; to empty oneself from an encounter—any encounter—with things is to die. Sensibility, having a body, is to be exposed to things. The body is the exposure. Yet there are no things for Levinas. He encounters them within the economy of the Same, within a movement (of labor, of enjoyment) that takes its bearings from the Same and returns to the Same.¹ Or he encounters them as gifts (TI 77), as the offer that the Same makes to the Other to welcome her/him, to cover her/his nakedness, and to enact the ethical relationship. It is the Other, however, who constitutes the principle of the donation, not the things themselves.² In other words, things are for the Same, or for the Other, but not for themselves. That is, for Levinas there is no Otherness of things.³

Conversely, there are things in Heidegger. For him, things are the place where the gathering of the Fourfold—the morals, the gods, the earth, the sky—comes to pass.⁴ But the intimacy of things and Fourfold is not fusion, it is differing. Each thing remains other in hosting the Fourfold in its peculiar way: other than the Fourfold and other than any other thing; other than the morals, who can dwell by things in their thinging only if they can take care of things as things; if they can let them be in their otherness. The purpose of this essay is to lay the theoretical foundations for an approach to things that does not ignore their Otherness. According to Heidegger, the enactment of this respectful relation encrypts the path human beings must follow to be faithful to their destination as morals. Sharing Heidegger's conviction, this essay claims that in face of their

relation with things, human beings determine the authenticity of their mortality, that is, of their being human.

According to Levinas's suggestion, the place—which is not a place—where a relation with the Other can be achieved is ethics. Undoubtedly there is ethics in Levinas, even if his notion of ethics extends only to the other person (certainly the other man, hopefully, also the other woman and child).⁵ Conversely, there is no ethics in Heidegger, at least according to the most common reading. If the two thinkers are forced face-to-face in a confrontation that neither of them would advocate enthusiastically, the result is a chiasmatic structure,⁶ whose branches connect a double negation—non-ethics and non-things—and a double affirmation—ethics and things. Since Socrates, philosophy has walked the path of negation. If there is ethics, it is not of things; and if there are things, they are not ethical. The path of affirmation is a narrow strip, which has seldom been explored.⁷ It leads to an ethics of things, where ethics cannot be traditional ethics in any of its formulations (utilitarian, deontological, virtue-oriented), and things cannot be traditional things (objects opposed to a subject). At the intersection between ethics and things, Levinas and Heidegger meet. The former offers the notion of a non-traditional ethics, the latter of non-traditional things.

Some remarks are in order with respect to the modality of the meeting. Despite the common rootedness in Husserl's phenomenology, their encounter is not that of two Aristotelian friends; nor is the one the forerunner of the other; nor is the one in absolute opposition to the other. Levinas and Heidegger do not complement each other, either existentially or historically or philosophi-

cally (opposition being only the counterpart to complementation). They stand on their own as two separate, autonomous philosophical figures, one of whom, for chronological reasons, can exercise a sharp criticism of the other, which would be reciprocated, if chronology were to allow it. Their relation, escaping friendship, enmity, complementarity, is better characterized by the Derridian notion of supplement. A complement comes from the interior of a common territory and aims at completion and enclosure. A supplement derives its authority from the exterior, opening the path for further development. Despite the evident differences the two philosophers exhibit, the legitimacy of the face-to-face between Levinas and Heidegger is grounded in such a notion of supplementarity entailing exteriority.

According to Derrida, two different meanings cohabit, oddly although necessarily, in the notion of the supplement.⁸ The supplement is a surplus, an addition, a fullness that enriches another fullness. Yet the supplement is not only an excess. A supplement supplements. Its addition aims at replacement. It is as if it filled a void, an anterior default of a presence. It is compensatory and vicarious, "its place is assigned in the structure by the mark of an emptiness."⁹ Neither Heidegger nor Levinas need each other. Yet, in both there is a remainder of being that is not described, that is forgotten in their meditation. In Heidegger it is ethics, in Levinas it is things. As supplementing each other, Levinas and Heidegger remain external, exterior, other, each not defined as the other than the Same. But still as supplements, each of them offers the other that remainder that the other lacks.

The notion of lack and filling the lack, Derrida argues, is metaphysical in the postmodern/derrigatory sense, where what is metaphysical is what tends to self-completion and self-satisfaction in a totality. But, against Derrida, we wish to argue that the lack that supplementarity reveals is metaphysical in a sense closer to Levinas's Desire—which implies fullness—than to Platonic need—which entails emptiness. That is, metaphysical lack, *pace* Derrida, escapes totality. In the specific case of Levinas and Heidegger, the

lack is an emptiness that is not acknowledged (either by Levinas, or by Heidegger), not because of a lack of awareness that some enlightenment might obviate, but because their thoughts are, in themselves, self-sufficient. Their lack is not a lack; it is an absence that does not conceive of itself as an absence. Therefore, the re-opening of their thought has to come from the external, and cannot be fulfilled, either in Levinas, or in Heidegger, with the philosophical tools in their possession. In this sense, it is a Desire of that Other that neither can grasp. Both are affirmed and supplemented in a movement that does not deny either, because the affirmation of their difference precedes the negation of their limitations, so that there is nothing in either that needs to be sublated or redeemed. Yet neither Levinas nor Heidegger can return to themselves after the confrontation with the Other to whom each of them is exposed.¹⁰ The result is different from the moments that lead to it, and it is not an improvement or an accomplishment of either.

Besides preserving differences, the structure of supplementarity has one more advantage: it relieves the burden of instituting an oppositional confrontation between Levinas and Heidegger. Criticism is not the weapon of the supplement, nor is it its goal. The absence of criticism also renders the need for an apology unnecessary. Supplementarity is not concerned with legal justice—who is right and who is wrong—but with metaphysical justice—how to think in a way that renders justice to reality. The appeal to justice comes neither from Levinas nor from Heidegger. Rather, it comes from ethics and from things, as the two notions in need of a re-inscription within philosophical discourse. The ethics of things is the outcome of the supplementarity of Levinas and Heidegger when they are faced with their respective failures and Desire.

Yet, why an ethics? And why of things? What is an ethics of things? How does this ethics relate to traditional ethics? How does it relate to the ethics of the Other (person) that Levinas so vehemently advocates as the only, primary, originary form of ethics? Is there, can there be, an ethics of things? What is the meaning of the "of" connecting ethics to things? These are some of the theo-

retical questions it is necessary to address in order to give a full account of the significance and relevance of an ethics of things. The concrete elaboration of such an ethics will be left to a future project.

The hermeneutics of suspicion—Marx, Freud, Nietzsche, and not least Heidegger—have radically criticized the notion of value, thereby promising irremediably the possibility of a “big” ethics in the Aristotelian, or even Kantian, sense of an ethical system able to give laws to reality by imposing norms and prohibitions to be respected. Yet far from disappearing, the ethical discussion seems so flourish: “Medical ethics,” “legal ethics,” “environmental ethics,” not to speak of “business ethics,” crowd the contemporary ethical panorama. As the limitation in their names suggests, these are all forms of residual ethics, which, deprived of the possibility of a holistic approach to reality because God is dead, try to bridle at least that small part of reality within which they constitute themselves. Within the minimum realm in which they govern, they seek common values and principles able to give that part of reality order and rationality, upon which those who belong to the specific realm can ground their activity. Ethics becomes a *locus minimum*.¹¹

The function and character of these ethics is necessarily limited, not only with respect to the domain in which they rule, but also in terms of credibility. The reality that “small” ethics try to bridle by means of norms of behavior escapes their control. The rules they dictate are able neither to wonder over the infinite possibilities of good, nor to constitute a bulwark against the abyssal possibilities of evil reality manifests. To prove this beyond the disputability of any theoretical statement, the factual event of Auschwitz suffices. Against its happening any kind of “small” ethics but also of traditional ethics collapses.¹² An ethics that may still be viable must take such a failure into account, and be able to constitute itself as both a remedy and a hindrance to the repetition. Therefore, any ethics that wishes to be believable must renounce the claims normative ethics make of being a practical guide, or a moral ought, or a science of *mores*, traditions,

behaviors, of being able to posit rules and values as conditions for the development of human beings, of providing its followers with static sets of norms to direct moral actions. Ethics must renounce its normativity.¹³

What sense should ethics retain, then? According to the original meaning of *ethos*, ethics denotes “a dwelling place.”¹⁴ That is, ethics is a locative description, not a normative procedure. Ethics opens up a space. Rather than spatially, the *locus* identifies spaciousness. Spatially denotes the “safe space” in which, having accumulated and digested the notions coming from the past, one feels “at home,” that is, in the midst of one’s possessions, living the present and awaiting the future. But the encounter that takes place in ethical spaciousness is not with a fully unfolded presence—which would render possible adherence, but also its aberrations—but with what remains of the presence, with the Other, with what escapes the digestive power of the Same. Ethics does not deal primarily with being good, bad, or evil. It deals with how much of reality one is able to maintain. What is good is defined in terms of what preserves the maximum of reality from destruction.¹⁵ What is bad is what works against reality, for its destruction and annihilation. The *metron* of ethics becomes not an abstract principle of value, but reality itself, its concreteness, the gravity of things.

Levinas welcomes the ancient meaning. In his thought ethics is the place—which is not a place—where the appeal of the Other can be heard, where an encounter with the Other can come to pass in such a way that the Same is forced—with a force that is as spiritually authoritative as it is physically powerless—to become good, that is, moral. In other words, morality—as a set of rules—is subsequent to ethics, as the enactment of what ethics means. Ethics transcends morality, it is the transcendental ground for the normativity of morality. Ethics *per se* is neither moral nor immoral. In Levinas, the primacy of the good is ethical because it is metaphysical and not because it is moral. The reality of ethics is opened once the I meets the eyes of the Other, imploring her/him not to commit murder. Even when murder is committed, the I re-

mains within the sphere of the ethical, despite the immorality of its action. What has made Western philosophy unethical is not the committing of murder, but the denial of the murdered and of the murderer act. Ethics can only be metaphysical (if we want to remain within the range of Levinas’s terminology) or ontological (if we would rather adopt the phrasing of the post-metaphysical tradition).

The problem of whether to define ethics in terms of metaphysics or ontology, the nominal choice between a metaphysical ethics or an ontological ethics, is not merely a terminological question. Yet in the end it will dissolve into a terminological issue. The term “metaphysics” is charged by Heidegger with the accusation of ontotheology, closure, completeness, totalitarianism, violence, reduction to sheer presence, oblivion of the difference between Being and beings. These charges are brought for the sake of (ontological) difference. The term “ontology” is in turn denigrated by Levinas for its neutrality, anonymity, abstractness, concern with Being rather than existing beings. Once again the charges are brought for the sake of (existing) differences. The term “metaphysics” is rehabilitated by Levinas because of its understanding of reality in terms of height, vertically, transcendence of reality to thought and Being. The term “ontology” is retrieved by Heidegger. In part at least, because of its understanding of reality in terms of the difference between Being and beings; that is, reality can be explored in terms of the ultimate structures of Being rather than its political, social, biological, moral constitutions, which are always ontic.¹⁶ The ontological interpretation of reality would preserve that mobility that metaphysics—in the sense Heidegger criticizes—denies.

Both metaphysics and ontology, in the positive sense Levinas and Heidegger attribute to the two terms and not in the sense they criticize, are characterized by the same concern: that of not being oblivious to differences. What constitutes the difference is certainly crucial in differentiating Levinas from Heidegger. In Levinas, it is the difference between being and beyond being; in Heidegger, it is the difference between Being and

beings. The internal movement of the difference also shifts. For Levinas, the difference is transcendence; for Heidegger, if it is not properly immanence, it is not even transcendence. It is rather what, with a Derridean expression, one could call *différance*, the giving of itself of being, which can only give itself in beings, but always withdraws from them.¹⁷ Despite the undeniable differences in the thought of the two philosophers, a similar—but not an identical—structure characterizes each. It is as if Levinas reproduced at a second order of reality what Heidegger enacts at a first order: horizontal vertically in Heidegger (what we have called *différance*), vertical vertically in Levinas.¹⁸ But the structural movement remains the same. This structure could be appropriately called metaphysical: not in Levinas’s sense (although close to it), not in the sense Heidegger criticizes, but in the sense Descartes suggests in the Third Meditation.

In his discussion of the idea of God, Descartes distinguishes between formal reality and objective reality. Following Levinas’s (highly unusual) reading of Descartes, metaphysics could be considered as the difference between the two, between reality as it is and its perception, between the order of being and the order of knowing. Metaphysics is the fact that there is a reality that is bigger, or richer, than consciousness. Levinas applies this notion of metaphysics to the Other as person, who is always the *idea* of the Other, as the ego has the *idea* of God for Descartes. As Heidegger claims, however, given the structure of the Fourfold, reality is greater than what can be grasped of it. Reality escapes perception, it escapes thought, even when reality consists of things rather than God (*pace* Descartes) or persons (*pace* Levinas). In this sense, ethics can be said to be metaphysical, whether it involves the relation with the beyond-being (Levinas) or with Being (Heidegger). Metaphysics becomes transversal to the notions of transcendence, immanence, or *différance*. It describes what epistemology cannot achieve, what only the ethical dimension can approach.

Certainly a metaphysical ethics—as Levinas suggests—is an invitation to become good, to transcend oneself and the interiority of the Same.

But precisely because it is metaphysical, ethics is more than a moral (pre)disposition of the individual to act in a certain way, characterized as good according to some external principle posed by that same subject who is supposed to follow the principle, and it is more than a spontaneous benevolence destined to become aware of itself. A metaphysical ethics receives its orientation not from the subject, or from its formulation of values—which is the best life for human beings?—but from what epistemology cannot reach, from the Other, or from the Other of the Other, from the things themselves. The ethical individual is a response to an appeal that does not proceed from the individual her/himself, not even when such individuality is camouflaged under the universality of Kantian reason. This means that the ethical individual gives up the privilege of first action. To be free does not mean to claim authorship for oneself, to be autonomous, to be the archaic principle of one's life, but rather to respond (or not to respond) to an appeal coming from the exterior. To transcend oneself means to give up this claim to be the absolute beginning; to release oneself to the authority of the Other and the Other of the Other: to recognize that the I, although separated, is not alone.¹⁹ The ethical imperative comes from Otherness, from its right to existence as a form of reality. The only imperative is the injunction to let this Other be.

By withdrawing from any claim to normativity, a metaphysical ethics recedes, by the same move, from the arrogance—exhibited by any "small" ethics—to define and delimit reality into categories always too narrow and constraining because artificial. Ethics is not in possession of reality, not even in the form of a prescription of how it ought to be. What the I possesses is always a remainder of reality, what has been stiffened into the immobility of a still life. The truth of reality is always beyond its traces. In the object that the hand of the I grasps, there is no longer life. The object is a reject, the refuse of reality. It is what remains after the (Heideggerian) Fourfold has moved its abode somewhere else. It is not possible to possess that abode. Humans are not the only inhabitants of it: other inhabitants offer a resistance to appropriative movements that is

similar, in modes and shapes, to that offered by Levinas's Other. Not only humans and divinities, personal presences despite their substantial difference, dwell in the Fourfold. The earth and the sky inhabit it, too. And their resistance to domination and objectification is as strong as that of the (im)mortal Others.²⁰

It is not possible to possess the abode, unless a perversion of the nature of things—from things to objects. The impossibility of possession, however, does not legitimize irrationality, or any kind of negative theology of things. Irrationality, far from preserving things in their mystery, ignores them. It is within the boundaries of reason that things must exercise their subversive power, forcing reason to recognize them as the locus where thought cannot proceed further, where consciousness cannot appropriate its origin, where the I cannot return to itself. If it is not possible to possess the abode of the Fourfold, it is possible, however, to inhabit it. The proper dwelling in it, that dwelling that respects the Otherness of the co-dwellers, is ethics. Ethics resumes its ancient significance of dwelling place.

The relation with things (a relation that is alien to Levinas's meditation) becomes the place where the ethical reaches its broadest latitude. There the locative character of ethics doubles itself. Things are the locus where the Fourfold dwells in its structure of alterity (Heidegger), and ethics—as the place where Otherness can be encountered (Levinas)—is the locus where the locus of the Fourfold can be inhabited.

Why is the extension to things so important for ethical discourse? Why can ethics not be simply an ethics of the other person? Why, ultimately, does Levinas need to be supplemented by Heidegger? The main reason lies in the partiality of Levinas's project. No discourse on Otherness is genuine if it repeats in any of its parts those negative structures it aims to overcome. Not only the Other, but also the Other of the Other must become part of philosophical discourse for that discourse to achieve the level of metaphysicality²¹ advocates.

Every philosophy is a quest for wholeness, insofar as it retraces principle(s) of explicita-

tion/description of experience. The distinction among different philosophical projects—their being totalizing or not—lies in the methodology in which they engage to reach wholeness. Traditional Western thought has pursued wholeness by means of reduction, integration, systematization of all its parts. Totality has replaced wholeness, and the result is a totalitarianism from which what is truly Other escapes, revealing the deficiencies and fallacies of the attempted system. A philosophical discourse that aims to be metaphysical must still make the Other the theme of its discourse. But it must do so by moving not from the Same, but from the Other, and not only the Other, but also the Other of the Other, and, if that is the case, the Other of the Other of the Other. In this must, it must also be aware of the inescapable injustice embedded in any formulation of the Other (of the Other, of the Other) in terms of *logos*.

The same quest for wholeness marks both ways of philosophizing, those centered on ontology and those directed by heterologies. They both share the same claim to inclusiveness. What a metaphysical ethics does, however, is to consider the Other (of the Other, of the Other) not as a presence (that can be possessed because of its full presence), but always as the trace of the presence (therefore already gone, removed from the scene of discourse). And each trace is already a trace of the trace.²¹ Thus, the claim to inclusiveness is always displaced, not as an instance of an eternal quest for a (bad) infinite, but as the structure of the infinite itself. If the process of de-flection (rather than re-flection) halts, philosophy decays into totalitarianism, wholeness into totality, ethics into morality, the Other (of the Other, of the Other) into object. According to Heidegger's description things harbor in themselves the infinite movement of mirroring and deflection. It is necessary to include them in the philosophical discourse not so that philosophy becomes totalitarian, but (precisely because of its infinite Desire for wholeness) to avoid totalitarianism.

The play of deflection, of infinite mirroring, of the trace of the Other that is never a presence, is not an illusion, a phantasy, a hallucination produced by a shrewd magician or a mirage due

to the productive imagination of the I. The trace is always of a presence, never of an absence, even if it is the trace of a presence that can never be grasped, unless residually. Behind the mirror there is not a void, but the fullness of a presence. It is this same presence that appeals from things. Things are neither illusionary nor noumenal, as Plato and Kant and many others in their mold would like. Things possess a reality in themselves that cannot be postponed or distanced. Their materiality can be experienced, enjoyed, even possessed, if only through a specific modality of possession that comes into contact without possessing, so that possession is never a totalization. This modality, which cannot be fully thematized here, is the touching mode of tenderness. What cannot be possessed, what tenderness respects and preserves, is the fullness of the presence. In other words, a thing is richer than the sound, the smell, the taste of it the I may—and does indeed—enjoy. It contains memories of an unreachable past, of the ancestral dance of the earth and the elements, of the eternal play of light and darkness, of Being.

To escape totalitarianism, however, Heidegger's notion of things needs to be broadened. When Heidegger refers to things he does not mean what is signified by the same term in the expression "an ethics of things."²² The hidden assumption underlying Heidegger's notion is that things have been, at one time or another, in contact with human beings. Even in the recesses and solitude of the *Schwarzwald*, Heidegger remains a European, whose landscape, through the course of centuries, has been heavily shaped by the human hand. In the formulation "ethics of things," the term "things," besides denoting all sorts of non-human entities as hosts of the interplay of the Fourfold, aims to include within its range of signification also beings that have never been reached by any human activity. Uncontaminated nature displays the same metaphysical structure that the jug (or the bridge or the domesticated animal) does for Heidegger.²² Therefore, it participates in an ethics of things with the same dignity and according to the same modalities of the jug (or the bridge or the animal).

What does it mean for humans to be part of the Fourfold, when the Fourfold is hosted in a thing that has never received the imprint of human activity, not even in the form of a look the thing may have received? Heidegger's remarks on presence, which should always be understood as an interplay of presencing and absencing, together with the notion of preservation as the proper mode to inhabit the Fourfold, are crucial at this juncture. The presence of the mortals in the uncontaminated thing is their becoming present to it through their activity of preserving the thing in its unspoiled reality. But mortals participate in the Fourfold of the uncontaminated thing also in another sense. Although from a distance, the uncontaminated thing has witnessed the moral activities of innumerable human beings, which have gone by without imprinting their activity on itself. The thing has outlasted them all. It bears their mark in the form of an absence of any imprint. The uncontaminated thing will not only be preserved, but has been preserved in its most untouched being. Regardless of whether the actuality of this preservation is the best way to inhabit the Fourfold, the thing is still inhabited by mortals. The Fourfold maintains its fourfold dimensionality even in the untouched thing.

In Levinas the exposure to things—if there were such an exposure, which is not the case—would subvert the prior exposure and subjection to the Otherness of the Other as person. For him, human ethics is archetypal.²³ There may be some degree of truth to Levinas's conviction that the relation to the Other (person) represents the exemplar of ethics. The Other person is what compels the Same to ethics in the most authoritative way because it is more evident—with an evidence that is not epistemological, but ethical—to human beings.²⁴ The ethical authority of the Other, however, should not obliterate another form of Otherness, which is different from the Otherness of the other person, and whose presence is less apparent, less evident, less loud: the Otherness of what Levinas's ethics neglects: things.

The exemplarity Levinas advocates, then, should not entail ontological primacy, or primacy of perfection, or transcendental primacy, in com-

parison to which every other instance of a similar case is derivative—human ethics as the *arche*. Exemplarity should not be genealogical. It should rather be a case where something surfaces in the clearest manner: a model, a paradigm, an illustration, but also a loud-speaker, a magnifier through which other Othernesses may reverberate and voice their existence. The exemplarity of human ethics lies not in its being the prescriptive origin, but the descriptive model of ethics. As such a descriptive model the ethics of the Other person is to be broadened, because its paradigmaticity does not (and cannot) provide, although it indicates the metaphysical access to the existence of other Othernesses. In other words, a paradigm is not self-sufficient and all-inclusive. It depends on the existence of other cases that it describes, but does not exhaust. With respect to such cases, a paradigm performs a catalytic function: it brings them into the open in the power of their reality, disruptive of any attempt at fixation in a system (even an ethical system). Catalysis is not a mode of technological, or even genealogical production, where willful creation by an agent occurs. Catalysis is the fecundity of an explosion in which the conflagration is independent of the catalytic elements, accidental, external to them in its origin and power. The ethics of things may take its move from the ethics of the Other (person), but its truth is independent from the Other (person). It lies in the reality of the things themselves. The ethics of things reaches further than Levinas's ethics, even if it may receive an inspiration from that ethics.

Some difficulties arise in the project of extending Levinas's notion of ethics to Heidegger's concept of things. The notion of metaphysics that has been adopted allowed for a characterization of the ethics of things as metaphysical, cutting across the distinction between transcendence and immanence/*différance*. This distinction, which represents the difference between Greek philosophy and the Jewish tradition, presents itself again in applying Levinas's ethical categories to the reality of things.²⁵ A torsion, which is not a dis-torsion, is required. In Levinas, the voice of the ethical Other comes from on high. The Other is "what is positive enough to appeal to being and

separate enough for it to order it imperatively."²⁶ The Other is beyond being, is a break with being and ontology. In Heidegger, there is no height in things, although there is depth in them. Things are not beyond being. If anything, they are in being, as the gift of being. In a way, it is a case of reversed immanence, which grants some form of transcendence: what Heidegger calls the ontological *différance*. Being is beyond the things in which it gives itself, so that what may appear as reversed immanence, what is not properly transcending although is *différance*, is a circular ringing. As already shown, both are a form of metaphysics. The difference between metaphysical transcendence (Levinas) and metaphysical ringing (Heidegger), between height and depth, constitutes the difference between persons and things. The Other as person has height; the Other as thing has the open circularity of differing. The difference between the two expressions of Otherness does not indicate a lack on either side. It is rather a richness, as the supplementarity of Levinas and Heidegger is richness. Things and humans both entail the verticality of metaphysics, but each in its idiomatic way. Totality does not belong to ethics.

The opposition between transcendence and immanence—whatever form they may assume—should not be thought in terms of an antinomy. It is Levinas himself who has taught his readers to disregard oppositional, dichotomic ways of thinking in favor of differences. This means that in the differences there may be elements of similarity, without yielding to identity, but rather maintaining equivocality. As with the Other (person), despite the fact that things apparently do not stand on high, there is no reciprocity between the things and the I. The indifference with which things are charged, what Jean-Luc Nancy calls the "heart of stone" of the things as opposed to the mobility and mobilization of thinking,²⁷ speaks for their being located on a different level. The relationship remains asymmetrical. The presence of things appeals to the I in a way that goes beyond the I's understanding. It is not a matter of epistemological weakness, but rather, as Heidegger shows, of the inner structure of things. There is a sacredness that does not

appear from on high, but from below. The lowness is height, as the height of the Other (person) is also lowness in the destitution of the Other. Things are both Master—they obsess the I with the authority of a constant presence; they are always there—and hostage—they are frail, dependent on continuous protection; their existence is the frailty of a reality always in danger of being destroyed.

The metaphysicity of the transcendence of the Other and of the ringing of things is what draws the ground for an ethical discourse concerning both. However, this ethics remains different in the two cases, thus preserving the difference of things and persons. The metaphysical structure remains the same: in both cases, it is an ethics. One is an ethics of Otherness as person, the other is an ethics of Otherness as things. The difference preserves a metaphysical ethics from totalitarianism. It is a Desire for an infinite that is not exhausted in a same structural form.

The expression "ethics of things," as the result of the supplementarity of Levinas and Heidegger, acquires a double meaning: it is of things, as the place where things can manifest themselves in their reality as the guardians and the receptacle of the Fourfold, and from their receptivity can appeal to humans to dwell by them. But it is of things also in the sense that humans are compelled by things to respond to the demands placed upon them and shape their behavior in accordance to the inner mirroring of things. Things signify both a subject and an object for ethics. *Of* things means thus the directionality of a double movement: that which moves out from the things to reach the I and the Other, and that which, in response to the first, moves from the I and the Other to reach the things and to be concerned by them. The first movement is that of the demand or the appeal that things place on human beings by their mere impenetrable presencing there. It is the thingly side of the ethics of things. The second is that of tenderness, as the response to the demand and the properly human configuration of the ethics of things. Tenderness represents the future of a metaphysical ethics, that is, an ethics that is concerned not only with persons, but also

with things in their Otherness. Its concept, however, still awaits philosophical thematization.

ENDNOTES

1. The section of *Totality and Infinity* devoted to "Interiority and Economy" offers Levinas's broadest account (confirmed in subsequent works and interviews) of a phenomenology of things. See Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. A. Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), hereafter referred to as *TI*.
2. In *Otherwise than Being* the world—and the things—are "extended by the sense of alterity, which takes form and becomes a phenomenon in the face of another." Cf. Alphonso Lingis, "The Sensuality and the Sensitivity," in Richard Cohen, ed., *Face to Face with Levinas* (New York: SUNY Press, 1986), p. 227. See also Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. A. Lingis (The Hague-Boston: Nijhoff, 1981), hereafter referred to as *OBBE*.
3. One should note that in *Otherwise than Being* color and sonority are seen as a manifestation of a certain independence of the things, which is stabilized in art. Independence does not entail Otherness, however. Moreover, the qualities of the things are not the things themselves.
4. See Martin Heidegger, "The Thing," trans. A. Hofstadter, in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), and "Building, Dwelling, Thinking," trans. A. Hofstadter, in *Basic Writings* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), hereafter referred to respectively as T and BDT.
5. For this criticism see Catherine Chatter, "Ethics and the Feminine," in R. Bernasconi and S. Critchley, eds., *Re-Reading Levinas* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), pp. 119–29; Tina Chanter, "Feminism and the Other," in R. Bernasconi and D. Wood, eds., *The Provocation of Levinas* (New York: Routledge, 1988), pp. 32–56; Luce Irigaray, "Questions to Emmanuel Levinas: On the Divinity of Love," in *Re-Reading Levinas*, pp. 109–18; Craig R. Vasey, "Faceless Women and Serious Others: Levinas, Misogyny and Feminism," in A. B. Dalry and C. Scott, eds., *Ethics and Danger* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), pp. 317–30.
6. A similar project of an *Auseinandersetzung* between Heidegger and Levinas but not specifically on the issues of ethics and things is attempted by John Llewellyn, *The Middle Voice of Ecological Conscience: A Chiasmatic Reading of Responsibility in the Neighbourhood of Levinas, Heidegger and Others* (London: Macmillan, 1991). Ref-

PHILOSOPHY TODAY

- erence to the figure of the chiasmus is made by Levinas himself—with respect to Derrida—in "Wholly Otherwise," trans. S. Critchley, in *Re-Reading Levinas*, pp. 6–8. Derrida too has employed the same trope to describe deconstructive reading. See for example Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. A. Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), p. 70.
7. The path of affirmation has been suggested, although in a very peculiar way, by Spinoza. His description of thought and extension as the two parallel attributes of the unique substance as well as his definition of ethics as the free attunement to the necessary geometrical structure of substance might lead to an ethics of things where, in order to think freely, that is, adequately, thought should adequate itself to the inner structure of things. Whether this structure were to allow for alterity seems improbable, given the rationalist framework of Spinoza's *Ethics*. Levinas associates Spinoza with Parmenides and Hegel in their privileging unity over separateness and alterity. See *TI*, p. 102. But, as Jean-Luc Nancy remarks, Spinoza is the only one to offer explicitly a "thought-thing." See Jean-Luc Nancy, *Une pensée finie* (Paris: Galilée, 1990), p. 205.
8. Supplementarity is discussed by Derrida in *Speech and Phenomena, and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. D. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), pp. 88–104, in a chapter explicitly devoted to the "Supplement of Origin."
9. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. G. C. Spivak (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976), pp. 144–45.
10. The lack of the return to the speaking subject is what exempts the Other from participation in a totalizing dialectic of closure.
11. See Ugo Perone, *Moderata e memoria* (Torino: SEI, 1986), p. 91.
12. See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, trans. N. H. Smith (New York: Macmillan, 1964), p. 5.
13. See Heidegger's appropriate criticism of ethics when this notion is meant in the reductionistic sense of morality, for example in *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 16, or *if: An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. R. Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), pp. 16: 197–99, hereafter referred to as *IM*, or in the "Letter on Human-

ism," trans. F. Capuzzi, in *Basic Writings*, pp. 232–35, hereafter referred to as *LH*.

14. See *ibid.*, p. 234 and also Charles Scott, *The Question of Ethics: Nietzsche, Foucault, Heidegger* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 143–47.
15. Note what Heidegger says with respect to the verb "to save" (*retten*), which should be taken "in the old sense still known to Lessing. Saving does not only snatch something from a danger. To save really means to set something free [*freilassen*] into its own essence" (BDT, p. 328).
16. Although Heidegger is critical of the usage of the term "ontology," he writes that "we can also take the word 'ontology' in the 'broadest sense,'" "without reference to ontological directions and tendencies" (Cf. *Sein und Zeit*, p. 11 top). In this case, "ontology" signifies the endeavor to make being manifest itself, and to do so by way of the question "how does it stand with being?" (and not only with the essent as such) (*IM*, p. 41).
17. *Differenz* is the (ontological) difference in its differing from itself and therefore deferring itself. In this sense *differenz* is neither a word nor a concept. See Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, pp. 129–60. One should note, however, that Derrida's *differenz*, given its post-structuralist character, is entirely "horizontal," whereas the reference to the "ontological" dimension in Heidegger introduces "verticality." That is, the affinity, although legitimate, cannot be a ready assimilation.
18. Notice what is said in *Otherwise than Being* with respect to the amphibology of Being and beings (Heidegger) and the necessity of a reduction to another amphibology, that of the Saying and the Said (Levinas). See *OBBE*, pp. 51ff.
19. In *Otherwise than Being* Levinas identifies the freedom of the ethical subject with its infinite subjection, its passivity, its vulnerability, its exposure to the Other. See especially *OBBE*, pp. 121–29.
20. In *Totality and Infinity* Levinas criticizes Heidegger's notion of the Fourfold—and inhabiting the Fourfold—as one more case of ontological affirmation and domination. Levinas calls it "an ontology of nature" (*TI*, p. 46). What escapes Levinas, and what our interpretation of the Four-

fold retrieves, is the non-exhaustibility of such dwelling, the fact that the Fourfold can never be possessed. Therefore, Heidegger is immune from Levinas's criticism on this point.

21. On the notion of the trace, see Edward Casey, "Levinas on Memory and the Trace," in G. Moneta et al., *The Collegium Phenomenologicum: The First Ten Years* (Dordrecht-Boston: Kluwer, 1988), pp. 241–55.
22. Reference to the jug is explicitly made by Heidegger in "The Thing."

23. Levinas says that "vegetarianism, for example, arises from the transference to animals of the idea of suffering. The animal suffers. It is because we, as humans, know what suffering is that we can have this obligation [not to make an animal suffer needlessly]." T. Wright, P. Hughes, and A. Ainley, "The Paradox of Morality: An Interview with Emmanuel Levinas," in *The Provocation of Levinas*, p. 172. Does Levinas imply then that some suffering is better than other? Would there be a hierarchy in suffering? Isn't any suffering a scandal? Isn't his thought a form of anthropocentrism (at least)?

24. This statement contains the danger of a folding back of the ethical relationship upon itself, of a return of ethics to itself guided by the light of humanity or human suffering, of a self-reflection that retains a Narcissistic flavor (both Narcissus and the river are reflected, this time). The I and the Other return to themselves as to a two (rather than a one), delimiting a common territory (that of human ethics) that includes what is human in the "relation without relation," but excludes what is not human. In other words, the return of self-consciousness to itself is duplicated by its transformation into the dual relation between the I and the Other. The Third that keeps the relation open still moves within the common territory of human ethics.

25. See John Llewellyn, "Jewgreek or Greekflew," in *The Collegium Phenomenologicum: The First Ten Years*, pp. 282–286.
26. See Alphonso Lingis, "The Sensuality and the Sensitivity," p. 227.
27. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Une pensée finie*, p. 202.

Siena College, Loudonville, NY 12211