

DOI: 10.26319/3914

James McLachlan
Philosophy and Religion Department
Western Carolina University

From Mythology to Ethics: Seeking an Escape from Ontology in the Eschatologies of Berdyaev and Lévinas

Abstract:

The radical reformulation of Western philosophy proposed by Emmanuel Lévinas is the move beyond knowledge and being to ethics as metaphysics. For Lévinas this is accomplished as an escape, an evasion of being. Lévinas saw the story of Western philosophy as a tale that Being emanated, created, etc. an illusory pluralism that it will eventually overcome in total unity. “The adventure of the world,” to borrow a phrase from Whitehead, is an accident that does not affect the perfection of Being. Being is and multiplicity is a fall from perfection. The standard eschatological story in the West has been how the separated person makes his way back to harmony with being. Lévinas seeks to tell a different story. He offers an “ethical metaphysics” that is an alternative to ontology. Lévinas’s attempt at an escape from ontology is anticipated by Russian émigré philosophers in Paris in the 1920s and 30s, Lev Shestov and Nicolas Berdyaev. In particular, Berdyaev sought an eschatological escape from the perfection of Being.

Keywords:

Lévinas, Berdyaev, ontology, eschatology, ethics, myth, person

The radical reformulation of Western philosophy proposed by Emmanuel Lévinas is the move beyond knowledge and being to ethics as metaphysics. For Lévinas, this is accomplished as an escape, an evasion of being. From his essay *On Escape* (1935), through his *Existents and Existence* (1947), *Time and the Other* (1948), and culminating in his two great works *Totality and Infinity* (1960) and finally, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence* (1974). One of the images in Lévinas’s work is the evocation of stories of two travelers; one Greek, the other Hebrew. In

the first, Odysseus fights, wanders, and returns home unchanged by his travels. In the second, Abraham follows God into the desert, not knowing where he is going. The odyssey represents, for Lévinas, the Western notion of a perfection. Being that has emanated, created, etc., an illusory pluralism that it will eventually overcome in total unity when the traveler returns home to the metaphysical source. “As a stage the separated being traverses on the way of its return to its metaphysical source, a moment of a history that will be concluded by union, metaphysics would be an Odyssey, and its disquietude, a nostalgia.” But the philosophy of unity has never been able to say when came this accidental illusion and fall, inconceivable in the Infinite, the Absolute, and the Perfect.¹ This return takes many forms in Western thought, primarily as knowledge where the knower acquires information about the object of knowledge, and returns with it to add it to the store of information about the external realm. There are economic versions of the return where alienation is overcome through work. “Labor remains economic; it comes from the home and returns to it, a movement of Odyssey where the adventure pursued in the world is but the accident of return.”² For my purposes in this paper, what is significant is that, in the first instance, the adventure of the world is an accident that does not affect the perfection of being. Being is, and multiplicity is a fall from perfection. The standard eschatological story in the West has been how the separated person makes his way back to harmony with being.

In a 1982 article “God and ‘Being’s Move’ in the Philosophy of Emmanuel Lévinas,” Edith Wyschogrod has imagined Lévinas’s vision eschatologically. She asks that we imagine a stage divided into three parts. In the first, a human being wrenches itself free of the *tohu v’voahu* of Genesis. The human being has separated himself from being as *Il y a*. In the second part, she imagines a bucolic landscape in the fashion of a seventeenth century master. The human is at home in the world, he lives in enjoyment, but he also fears the uncertainty of the future, which threatens both enjoyment and life. He creates his dwelling against such vicissitudes. He seeks to control his world that becomes the content of what he can master. It is the content of thought, his thought. To a certain extent, he can control his images of the world as he represents it to himself. But not everything can be reduced to the content of thought.³ Into this uncertainty that the human endeavors to eliminate, through representation of the outside world in thought, comes the Other, the third part of the Lévinasian drama, which Wyschogrod places center stage. In the central part of the drama, the humans do not dwell in language: rather, existence is a conversation. But the characters are placed rather oddly, one of them is at a distance, and elevated over the other. The Other requires “concernful solicitude,” and is more fragile and vulnerable than the self. But the position of the other is not an opportunity to take advantage and thus improve the self’s control of the uncertain world. Rather, Wyschogrod writes:

We soon learn from his utterances that the sheer existence of the Other serves as prescription and interdict: ‘Thou shall’t regard the Other as thy teacher’ and ‘Thou shall’t not commit violence against the next man for he is thy neighbor.’~ as The Other is experienced requiring concernful solicitude, for he is more fragile and vulnerable than the self. But it is difficult to maintain this deference; at times our protagonist rebels against the unrelenting demand of alterity. A new possibility is thus brought into existence: either man heeds the solicitation of the Other or he becomes *Homo homini lupus*.⁴

1) Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 102.

2) *Ibid.*, 176–177.

3) *Ibid.*, 122–127.

4) Edith Wyschogrod, “God and ‘Being’s Move’ in the Philosophy of Emmanuel Lévinas,” *The Journal of Religion*, vol. 62, no. 2 (Apr. 1982): 145–155.

The human being constantly stands on a point of decision in relation to the call of the other. How should one respond? One can heed the call, ignore it, or even attack it.

There is an eschatological vision in the theatrical structure of Wyschogrod's description of what happens in *Totality and Infinity*. I think any cursory reading of the book would have to see it there. It certainly resembles the teleological structure of the plot of a drama with its beginning, middle, and end, that Aristotle describes in the *Poetics*. It looks, in some respects, like the three part dramas of Christian eschatological visions, from Augustine to Kierkegaard and C.S. Lewis. The self stands out and falls from identification with the all, wanders through the uncertainty of the world, and there is a third and final act, in which the other chooses self-love or the love of God. Of course the author, God, may have made all these choices already. But in the Christian eschatological vision, like the journey of Odysseus, the return is to a kind of perfection of being. The soul finds its home in God. But in Lévinas's version, this doesn't seem to be the case. The *eschaton* seems only to insist on the horizon in the conversation, in the ethical. But the ethical takes place in the play, the transcendent is not the author watching his creation from beyond, but is compressed into the intersubjective existence of the characters. Neither is this a Heideggerian play. It is not "Being's Move" that is the meaning of the play. Lévinas does not consider the ontological difference between Being and beings. The confusion that takes place on stage can't be resolved by pointing to the ontological/ontic confusion between Being and beings. That is still in the realm of the Said. Transcendence cannot be forced into the ontological mold. The ethical relation is between persons, it is in relation to the Other who makes her appeal to me.⁵

On Escape

Lévinas's rebellion against being as the original perfection of being is by its nature eschatological, and is prefigured in his 1935 essay *De L'Evasion*, which he begins with the following statement about being. "The revolt of traditional philosophy against the idea of being proceeds from the discord between human freedom and the brute fact of being against which it butts."⁶ The very image of humanity butting its head against the wall of ontology recalls Dostoevsky's underground man, that 19th century rebel who butts his head against the wall of being in favor of his "own sweet will."⁷

Lévinas was not alone in 1930s Paris, in seeking a way out of ontology, an escape from being. His fellow Eastern Europeans, the Russian émigrés Lev Shestov and Nicolas Berdyaev had both come to Paris in the 1920s, exiles of the revolution. Like Lévinas, who had come to France to study at Strasbourg, both Shestov and Berdyaev were admirers of Dostoevsky.⁸ Each of them had written widely read studies of the

5) Ibid., 152; Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 127–128.

6) Emmanuel Lévinas, *De L'Evasion* (Paris: Fata Morgana, 1982), 91.

7) Lévinas seem to cite the Underground Man in his essay.

"The revolt of traditional philosophy against the idea of being proceeds from the discord between human freedom and the brute fact of being against which it butts." (Author's translation) (*Le révolte de la philosophie contre l'idée de l'être procède du désaccord entre la liberté humaine et le fait brutal de l'être qui la heurte*), (Lévinas, *De L'Evasion*, 91).

This very statement recalls the underground man's image of humanity butting its head against the necessary truths of being.

Merciful Heavens! But what do I care for the laws of nature and arithmetic, when, for some reason I dislike those laws and the fact that twice two makes four? Of course I cannot break through the wall by battering my head against it if I really have not the strength to knock it down, but I am not going to be reconciled to it simply because it is a stone wall and I have not the strength.

Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from the Underground* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1992).

8) Lévinas said of Dostoevsky:

I think that it was first of all my readings in Russian, specifically Puskin, Lermontov, and Dostoevsky, above all Dostoevsky. The Russian novel, the novel of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, seemed to me very preoccupied with fundamental things (IR 28).

Russian writer.⁹ In 1937 Berdyaev participated, with Lévinas, in a discussion of Jean Wahl's "Subjectivité et Transcendence."¹⁰ That same year Lévinas reviewed Shestov's *Kierkegaard and the Existential Philosophy: A Voice Crying in the Wilderness*.¹¹ Edith Wyschogrod claims that what Lévinas wrote of Shestov could be taken as the program of his later thought.¹²

In the West, since Parmenides, being has been the goal of philosophy. Being is what it is or both is what it is and is not what it not. Being transcends the temporal realm of change and destruction. It is eternal, true. The romantics, and Heidegger, included becoming in being. Being became a verb rather than substance. The world is not simply the pale reflection of the eternal perfection. Two of Lévinas's key influences, Heidegger and Bergson, make time central in their ontologies. But already in the early writing, *On Escape*, Lévinas seeks an alternative to being. For the young Lévinas, the inclusion of becoming with ontology, the making of being into a verb still subjugates the person to ontology. It is Being that offers us the world and the things in it. This is Heidegger's *es gibt*. Identity is the expression of Being. "It is the expression of the sufficiency of the fact of being which it seems no one knows how to put into question its absolute and definitive character."¹³ Occidental philosophy has never gotten beyond being. Even when it has fought against ontologism, it has done so in favor of a higher, better being; for the better adjustment and harmonization of us to the world, and for the perfection of our true being. "Its idea of peace and equilibrium presuppose the self-sufficiency of being."¹⁴ Being weighs on us in its bruteness and seriousness. In the modern period, at least since the romantics, various thinkers and movements have sought to escape the power of Being in its various guises. Artists have rebelled against the bourgeois, humanity against the machine, etc., all in the name of liberation of some sort. These are all variations on a theme, the depths of which they cannot equal.¹⁵

The insufficiency of the human condition has never been understood otherwise than as a limitation of Being. "... The transcendence of these limits, the communion with the infinite being remained its sole preoccupation... And yet the modern sensibility grapples with problems that indicate, perhaps for the first time, the abandonment of this concern for transcendence."¹⁶ It is not the existence of God, his ways or his essential

9) Nicolas Berdyaev, *Dostoevsky: An Interpretation* (New York: Semantron Press, 2009). Lev Shestov, *Dostoevsky and Nietzsche: The Philosophy of Tragedy*, trans. Spencer Roberts, in *Lev Shestov, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Nietzsche* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1969). For Shestov, the stone wall of being and necessity is so tranquilizing and morally soothing, that we will accept the greatest horrors as eternal truths. Shestov agrees with the underground man, that we should never accept the finality of the wall. Lev Shestov, *Athens and Jerusalem*, trans. Bernard Martin, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1966), 80.

10) Jean Wahl et al., "Subjectivité et Transcendence, Séance de Samedi 4 décembre 1937," *Bulletin de la Société Française de Philosophie* 37, no. 5 (Octobre-Décembre, 1937): 161–211.

11) Emmanuel Lévinas, a review of Leon Chestov's "Kierkegaard et la philosophie existentielle" in *Revue des Etudes Juives* 1, nos. 1–2 (1937): 139–41.

12) Wyschogrod writes:

In one of his earliest writings, a review of Leon Chestov's "Kierkegaard et la philosophie existentielle" in *Revue des Etudes Juives* 1, nos. 1–2 (1937, 139–141. Lévinas concludes: "Shestov interprets the philosophy of Kierkegaard as a combat undergone by a soul abandoned to despair in a world ruled by reason and the ethical." (Leon Chestov is also known as Lev Shestov). He sees in Shestov's interpretation of a Kierkegaard who proclaims the supremacy of Jerusalem over Athens. This interpretation, he writes, is made explicit in Shestov's book *Athens and Jerusalem*. What Lévinas writes of Shestov's analysis of Kierkegaard might well be taken as a program for his own future work.

Edith Wyschogrod, *Emmanuel Lévinas: The Problem of Ethical Metaphysics*, 2nd edition (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 26n4.

13) Lévinas, *De L'Evasion*, 93.

14) *Ibid.*

15) *Ibid.*, 96.

16) *Ibid.*

properties, that concern Lévinas. “It is not toward eternity that escape accomplishes itself. Eternity is only the accentualization or the radicalization of the fatality of being bound into itself. And there is a profound truth to the myth of the eternity that weighed on the immortal gods.”¹⁷

Binaries of finite and infinite but such things are opposites only within being. Finitude is not the problem. Death is not the resolution. The true flight is not directed at any goal. It is, rather, like the journey of Abraham into the desert, as opposed to Odysseus, who is going away to back home. Abraham does not know where he is going, but knows he will not return. The malaise is “an attempt to leave without knowing where one is going.”¹⁸ In 1935, Lévinas thought flight from being is called for, but that it is also impossible. He says that this impossibility is not simply a failure. It is the structure of the failure of a certain type of metaphysics. The mirror of being is a failure. Consider the theological idea of the world as the mirror of God; the mirror is distorted, it fails. The escape from Being is related in Lévinas’s later work to the impossibility in thought of the ambiguity of the face, the intrigue of the other, the enigma of the infinite, and so forth. In *Totality and Infinity* escape is concretized as the ethical movement toward the other. But in 1935 we only have the desire to escape Ontology. Being is a burden for itself and, consequently, the source of all desire.¹⁹ Escape is an internal possibility of being, and thus tainted by being and existence. It is only by turning to the ethical, making a personalist move, that Lévinas is able to move beyond this problem, to evade it, to break out. But in 1935, he shared with Shestov and Berdyaev the desire to escape from being.

Jacques Rolland, in a note to Lévinas’s discussion of the shame about our bodies, refers to Anaximander’s fragment about the punishment individual must suffer as result of the impiety their separation from the one, the apeiron.²⁰ Lévinas’s Russian Jewish contemporary in 1930’s Paris, Lev Shestov, of whom Lévinas would write an early and somewhat appreciative review, captures this Lévinasian and Dostoevskian theme throughout his entire corpus in his repeated references to the Anaximander fragment on the impiety of individual existents that must be punished for their individuality, and return into the wholeness of the one.

By a strange whim of fate the first fragment of the writings of the ancient Greek philosophers that has come down to us reads as follows:

The origin of all things is the boundless “and this very thing that gives birth to them is necessarily also the cause of their destruction, for at an ordained time they must undergo punishment and retribution by each other for the impiety”... . What is striking is the fact that the thought in contains has determined in large measure the character and direction of the searchings of all later philosophy, not only Greek but European.²¹

Shestov thinks that this idea of the impiety of the existence of individual beings in relation to the universal being permeated the thought of Anaximander’s descendants. He believes that this is the key idea that permeates aspects of Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, Plotinus, Western, and perhaps Eastern, religion and philosophy. In each case, Being as the one is eventually favored over the many beings whose very existence is

17) Ibid., 95.

18) Ibid., 78.

19) Ibid., 93.

20) Ibid., 143.

21) Lev Shestov, *Potestas Clavium* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1968), 147.

an impiety.²² In Western thought, religious and non-religious, the confusion and richness of the plurality must be reduced to a single truth. Shestov writes, “One alone rightfully existed.”²³ Lévinas sees this as finally an acceptance of the horrors of the world to which we might sacrifice all we love as the ultimate barbarism. “Any civilization that accepts being, that tragic despair that it carries and the crimes that it justifies, merits the name of barbarism.”²⁴ Like Shestov, Lévinas is a metaphysical rebel against the cruelty of the sacred, of being as not something that one should resign oneself to, much less embrace. Thus opposed to the Odyssey of exile and return, Lévinas sought an ethical eschatology in which the exiles have value in themselves, not in a return to the harmony of being.

Berdyaeu and Slavery to Being

In 1939 Nicolas Berdyaeu published *Slavery and Freedom*, in which he lays out his version of personalism, an ethical metaphysics where persons are the highest reality. In the chapter, “The Slavery of Man to Being,” Berdyaeu explains the desire to escape ontology. Metaphysics has always aspired to be ontology, a philosophy of being. Ontology misses the basic unrepeatable of particulars. But Being does not exist, in scholastic terms it is *essentia* has no existential, thus ontologies are not existential philosophies.²⁵ He claims slavery to being is the “primary form of the slavery it affirms a proper order of being.”²⁶

Parmenides was an “ontologist *par excellence*.”²⁷ Plato is a more ambiguous figure who could not reconcile himself to such an abstractness, and tried to implicate and refine the problem of being. But the ontological tradition comes down from Plato, and in our time the representatives of ontological philosophy are Platonists. Berdyaeu ties being to his idea of objectification that in concepts we objectify the freedom, life, and creativity of others and turn it into a thing we can control. “Being is a concept, that is to say it is something which takes place as a result of objectified thought; the imprint of abstraction lies upon it and, therefore, it enslaves man as every form of objectivization does. In the primary subjectivity of existence being was certainly not included. We have no experience of being as a primary datum.”²⁸ In Parmenides and Plato, being is the universal common. “The individually unique is either derivative, subordinate, or illusory.” In ontology, the world of concepts is the realm of law, the common and necessary.²⁹ In opposition to the order of being, the spiritual world knows only the unique and the personal. It is the realm of freedom. But things “in general” do not exist, but in individuals the universality (not the commonness) of things do exist. We arrive at the concrete universal not by abstracting the common properties, but by submersion in the oneness of the unique and particular, the personal. Personality is an act, it is freedom, not being. “The ego, personality, is more primary than ‘being’ which is the

22) Shestov reads Anaximander as the father of Greek and European thought.

Anaximander believes that “things” by being born, i.e., by detaching themselves from the original “universal” and “divine” unity in order to attain their present particular being, have committed an act that is impious to the highest degree, and [sic] act for which they must in all justice undergo the supreme punishment—death and destruction. Things means all visible objects: stones, trees, animals, men. Neither the stone nor the camel, neither the eagle nor man, has any right to aspire to the freedom of individual existence. (*Ibid.*, 148.)

23) *Ibid.*, 149.

24) Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 127.

25) Nicolas Berdyaeu, *Slavery and Freedom*, trans. Reginald Michael French (New York: Charles Scribners, 1944), 78.

26) *Ibid.* So politically, socially, and theologically the oppressive order of the world is maintained by the powers that be.

27) *Ibid.*, 73.

28) *Ibid.*

29) *Ibid.*, 74.

result of categorical thinking, Personality is more primary than being. This is the basis of personalism.³⁰ He thinks that we must choose between two philosophies: one which accepts the primacy of being over freedom, and another that accepts the primacy of freedom over being. “Personalism must recognize the supremacy of freedom over being.”³¹ Berdyaev opposes any idea of an eternal impersonal order of being not created by human beings, and to which they are subordinated. Theologically, the foundations of the world were staggered by the fall into objectification, but they can be changed by human activity and creativeness. No pre-arranged harmony exists.³²

“Personality is outside all being. It stands in opposition to being. Everything personal, truly existential and effectively real has no general expression; its principle is dissimilarity. . . . Being is subject to personal existence, freedom, spirit.”³³ Finally, Berdyaev declares, humanity is not searching for being but for truth.

This means that truth is the concrete personality: it is its way and its life. Truth is the in the highest degree dynamic. It is not given in a finished and a congealed form. Truth is not dogmatic. It is only given in the creative act. Truth is no being and being is not truth. Truth is life. It is the existence of the existing; only the existing exists. Being is only the congealed and indurated part of life, life which has been cast out into objectivity.³⁴

For Berdyaev the question of the meaning of life then is to find concrete personality. This is an ethical quest. The mature Lévinas speaks in a similar way about the meaning of being, not being ontological, but ethical. “It is a question of the meaning of being: not the ontological meaning of the comprehension of this extraordinary verb, but the ethical meaning of the justice of being.”³⁵

Eschatologies

Wyschogrod has noted Lévinas’s anti-Platonic admiration for Plato.³⁶ Lévinas has listed *Phaedrus* as one of the five great books in philosophy and appeals to Plato’s pointing at the good beyond being. But at the same time, Plato gives up the person in favor of eternal, universal ideals. Contrast Berdyaev’s and Lévinas’s ethical desire as the desire for the other, with all its risk, to the nostalgia for the eternity of perfect being in Plato’s description of *eros* from the symposium. Plato’s defines an *eros* in which there is no risk and no attachment to a particular, finite person. The philosopher as he moves toward the love of perfect beauty, loves that fair youth only for the eternal form of beauty imprinted in him, and loves not the youth himself. The lover of wisdom looks past all finite forms to contemplate the eternal One. Plato’s desire for the eternal absolute purity beyond individuals “clogged with the pollutions of mortality,” illustrates an ultimate disdain for the finite and earthly that would become part of traditional theism.

But what if a man had eyes to see the true beauty – the divine beauty, I mean pure and clear and unalloyed, not clogged with the pollutions of mortality and all the colors and vanities of human life – thither looking, and holding converse with the true beauty simple and divine? Remember how in that communion only, beholding beauty with the eye of the mind, he will be enabled to bring forth, not images of beauty, but realities for he has

30) Ibid., 75.

31) Ibid., 76.

32) Ibid., 77.

33) Ibid., 80.

34) Ibid., 81.

35) Emmanuel Lévinas, *The God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press), 172.

36) Wyschogrod, “God and Being’s Move,” 149.

hold not of an image but of a reality, and bringing forth and nourishing true virtue to become the friend of God and be immortal, if mortal man may. Would that be an ignoble life?³⁷

The finite being is vulnerable and this makes all commitment risky. It would be safer to define one's commitment in the relation to an abstract idea.

Many personalists can be seen in terms of this quest. Edgar Brightman's God, a spirit in difficulty, illuminates that non-rational given, through his relation with the world. For Berdyaev the quest is completed in the infinite creativity that culminates in creation of relation with others. Martin Buber sees completion in the redemption of the world through the I-thou relation. For Gabriel Marcel, the movement from primary to secondary reflection represents movement to the created unity in plurality of being. In Lévinas's ethical metaphysics, the movement is from the impersonality of the "there is," through the egoism of separation, to the call of the other to responsibility. Lévinas is both indebted and yet also critical of all these positions, which he would see as putting forward aesthetic eschatologies that give priority to creativity over ethics. I will attempt to illustrate these as examples of the kind of Romantic eschatology that critic Meyer Howard Abrams described as the Circuitous Journey.³⁸

Romantic Eschatology

In his famous book on the romantics *Natural Supernaturalism*, Abrams argues that many of the romantic works follow the theme, exemplified in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, of the "Circuitous Journey." This journey basically consists in three parts.

- 1) **Unconscious Unity:** The unconscious unity is the potentially fecund but actually meaning-less abyss. This is the absolute, but it is a unity that is nothing in the sense of no-thing. It is a chaos of pure potency, a meaning less chaos of indeterminism.
- 2) **Alienation from others and nature:** Alienation is emergence of the individual, conscious self. But this emergence requires the split between the natural or unconscious realm of objects, and the conscious realm of the individual subject. This is a false split that can only be healed by the imagination. Alienation can be thought of as a series of false images or projections of the self and its relation to the world. For F. W. J. von Schelling and Berdyaev, this involves two forms of evil/despair that arise from within this condition: 1) to be swallowed up in chaos; 2) to create such a stultifying order as to do away with freedom. Each has a myriad of representations, and each is a false image of the self.
- 3) **Conscious Unity; or, the "Mediation" of the Imagination between Nature and the Human:** This is represented in the return home, but it is not a return to the innocence of phase one consciousness but is at a higher and more intense level. In romantic and dialogical visions, this termination of the quest was usually thought of as social, represented in the ideal of love. Both the self and other are preserved in a higher unity. Schelling's *Of Human Freedom* states "This is the secret of love, that it unites such being as could each exist in itself, and nonetheless neither is nor can be without the other." and "This is the secret of eternal Love – that which would fain be absolute in itself nonetheless does not regard it as a deprivation to be so in itself but is so only in and with another."³⁹

37) Plato, *The Symposium in The Works of Plato*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (New York: The Dial Press, 1936), 342–43.

38) Meyer Howard Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1973).

39) F. W. J. von Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. Jeff Love and Johannes Schmidt (Albany: SUNY Press, 2006), 70.

Berdyaev: A Romantic Escape through Myth

Quite early in his philosophical career, Berdyaev was attracted to Jacob Boehme's myth of the *Ungrund*, because through the myth Boehme formulated questions about the relation of the divine and the human, freedom and determinism, creation and destruction, in a radically different manner than had occurred heretofore in the West. Jacob Boehme's ideas came into this tradition as mainly original creations of an independent and non-academic mind, largely uninfluenced by the Greek and Latin traditions.⁴⁰ The basic difference between Boehme and the previous Christian mystics of the Neo-Platonic tradition is that he did not regard the Absolute primarily as Being but as will.⁴¹ This dialectical voluntarism is based on the image of groundlessness, which is the beginning of the development of Being. The *Ungrund* contains within it all of the antinomies, but they are unrealized and only potential: Boehme calls the *Ungrund* the "eternal silence." It is the actualization in Being of these potentialities that is the source of life.

The Ungrund and Berdyaev's Anti-Ontology

Using the myth of the *Ungrund*, Berdyaev begins from the initial intuition of freedom and creativity as fundamental metaphysical principles and seeks to create a metaphysical vision in harmony with that intuition. Strictly speaking, the *Ungrund* is not anything, not a concept, but a myth, a symbol whereby is expressed a fundamental truth about existence that is incapable of being expressed in an objective conceptual arrangement.⁴² This incapacity concerns knowledge itself, it is beyond the limits of an objective knowledge of things. All novelty, all uniqueness, is inexplicable unless freedom is prior to Being. And Freedom is no-thing. It is the undetermined. Berdyaev's is an anti-ontological metaphysics, in which freedom is prior to Being. Freedom is primarily, ultimately, real, and as such, its essence lies outside any kind of external determination: it cannot be derived from any more fundamental kind of reality. It cannot be subordinated to Being qua Being, because freedom refuses all

40) Though opinions vary on Boehme's importance and place in the history of Western thought, he has earned the acclaim of some of his most important successors. He was hailed by Hegel as the founder of German Idealism. [G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, vol. III, trans. E.S. Haldane (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1955), 188.] In his study on Boehme, Alexandre Koyré also calls attention to his influence on Fichte and Hegel, as well as the second philosophy of Schelling and Boehme's disciple, Franz von Baader. [Alexandre Koyré, *La philosophie de Jacob Boehme* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1968), 506–8]. Koyré also points out that Boehme was read by such divergent minds as Newton, Comenius, Milton, Leibniz, Oetinger and Blake. [See also Andrew Weeks, *Boehme: An Intellectual Biography of the Seventeenth-Century Philosopher and Mystic*, (Albany: NY, SUNY Press, 1991). Rufus Jones, *Spiritual Reformers of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1959), and Margaret Lewis Bailey, *Milton and Jacob Boehme: A Study in German Mysticism in XVII Century England* (New York: Haskell House, 1964, Reprint)]. Nicholas Berdyaev points to the importance of Boehme's influence (via Schelling) on the Slavophiles and says that the metaphor of *sophia* is found in the second generation of Russian philosophers beginning with Soloviev and including Bulgakov, Frank, the Symbolist poets Blok, Beyli and Ivanov. He also acknowledges his own debt to Boehme. [Nicholas Berdyaev, "Deux études sur Jacob Boehme" in *Jacob Boehme, Mystérium Magnum*, Tome I (Paris; Aubier, 1945), p. 39]. Boehme is one of those figures whose life is obscured by legend. Koyré notes that though it is true that he was a shoemaker by profession in the Silesian village of Gorlitz, his doctrine was not created completely ex-nihilo; although he was unacquainted with Platonic and Neo-Platonic thought, the ideas of many of the mystics and alchemists of his time were familiar to him. Another source of Boehme's doctrine may have been the Kabala. But the extent that any of these sources may have determined the content of Boehme's theosophy is subject to speculation. [Hegel, p. 188. Koyré, pp. 502–08. Berdyaev, *Essai de métaphysique eschatologique*, trans. Maxime Herman (Paris: Aubier, 1946), 122].

41) Boehme is not the first voluntarist in Western thought, but the manner of his voluntarism is quite new. Unlike Duns Scotus and Medieval voluntarists Boehme's voluntarism more closely resembles that of the *Vedas*. The primal beginning is not a personal God but the nothingness.

42) Nicolas Berdyaev, *Freedom and the Spirit*, trans. Oliver Fielding Clarke (New York Books for Libraries Press, 1972), 73.

determination. Berdyaev would accept the first half of the traditional metaphysical argument, that it is impossible to conceive anything more ultimate than Being, since anything must be in order to have attributes, and it would appear that freedom is an attribute of a being. Berdyaev agrees that for any thing to have attributes it must first have Being, but he would object to the idea that freedom is an attribute of a Being. Freedom is beyond the categories of objectified thought: freedom is existence, not an attribute of Being. Freedom is no-thing. This is the closest idea we can have of reality, the Absolute.

It is because of Berdyaev's placing of indeterminacy at the beginning of his thought, that Charles Hartshorne and more recently David Griffin have been led to claim that Berdyaev is unnecessarily irrational. And, I believe, has led Griffin to the two other claims: that Berdyaev clothes the relation between the divine and the human in mystery; and, that the Goodness of God becomes problematic because God is reduced to an amoral creativity. This last claim seems to echo Levinas's critique of mythology and the sacred. That an amoral, impersonal being or primordial creativity leads to the demotion of ethics to a secondary position in relation to being. But this is where Griffin has misunderstood Berdyaev. Berdyaev gives us a type of romantic eschatology. For Berdyaev, this indeterminacy is immediately determined by a moral rationality that is centered in a personalist and dialogical metaphysics.

The import of moral reason is Kantian, but unlike Kant, and following the mystic Boehme, Berdyaev believes that a mystical experience of the whole, of God, and of freedom is fundamental to the priority of freedom. He sees this experience as beyond both the dualism and monism of rational theology and ontology. In *Freedom and the Spirit* Berdyaev gives his interpretation of the meaning and importance of the great German mystics (Eckhart, Tauler, and especially Boehme) to philosophy. Berdyaev thinks the mystic attempts to express the idea that freedom is the essential datum in the relation of the divine and human. The roots of this relation are beyond the static categories of ontology and are only possible as a free relation between God and His/Her Other. This relation is rooted in freedom. The existence of the divine supposes the existence of the human. The antinomies are interdependent.

Boehme maintained the doctrine of the Ungrund which was at a deeper level than God Himself. The meaning of the distinction between God and Divinity is not expressible in metaphysics or ontology. This truth can only express itself in terms of spiritual life and experience and not in the categories of a rigid ontology. God becomes God only in relation to creation. In the primal void of the divine Nothingness, God and creation, God and man disappear and even the very antithesis between them vanishes. "Non-existent being is beyond God and beyond differentiation." The distinction between the Creator and creation is not the deepest that exists, for it is eliminated altogether in the divine Nothingness which is no longer God.⁴³

Berdyaev emphasizes that the relation between God and creation makes the existence of both possible.⁴⁴ Both only exist, as individual entities, in the relation between them. The *Ungrund* precedes both God, humanity, and Nature and they arise from it. It is the mythic characterization of the priority of indeterminate possibility over Being. But the idea of this indeterminant beginning is also the affirmation of the basic equality and unity of all individuals. All of them have the same source: freedom.

The *Ungrund*, freedom, is the Absolute, the primary basis of the existence of God, but this freedom is also at the depths of all that is. The absolute is not wholly good, Berdyaev would argue that God, as a person, is wholly good, but the possibility of evil is present in the absolute and thus present in God, and in the world.

43) Ibid., 194.

44) This relation between individuals and between individuals and God is similar to that developed in the later Schelling, in his interpretation of the categorical imperative as the basis of a metaphysics of freedom. Schelling also appeals to Boehme's image of the *Ungrund* to illuminate the primal unity of all beings in pre-existential freedom.

The “absolute” itself neither is a person, God, Being, nor even a perfection. The personal God is God because of Her/His continual choice of good over evil. In fact, Berdyaev sees this as the great advance of German mysticism over Greek philosophy and Neo-Platonic mysticism.

Berdyaev sees the development of personality as superior to the absolute in-itself. The absolute in-itself is not the end (*telos*) of either divine or human history. Berdyaev’s metaphysics is eschatological. The end of history is the creation of the kingdom of God. Berdyaev conceives of the Kingdom of God as the creation of something like the Kantian Kingdom of Ends but one where the concrete reality of the person is the foundation of any moral law. It is a community of persons, that includes God, in free relation. Once again, the similarity to the mature Lévinas is striking. Both seek an ethical understanding of metaphysics, but not one based on principles, but rather of the reality of the person. The difference here being the Berdyaev heavy existentialist reliance on an idea of freedom as primary, and Berdyaev’s use of *Ungrund* mythology to explain his metaphysical system.

Lévinas critiques any notion of the sacred, like those found in Heidegger, Durkheim, Eliade, and Otto, where the individual person is swallowed up in the numinous real. He sees the sacred and numinous religious ideas that are near to the idolatrous worship of being. Levinas understands the sacred as a notion of a single ground that unites everything. He seems to have in mind the ideas of important 20th century theorist of religion Emile Durkheim, who wrote *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, the theologian and phenomenologist Rudolf Otto who wrote a book *The Idea of the Holy (Das Heilige)*, and Mircea Eliade who wrote *The Sacred and the Profane*. In these latter two works the Sacred is the unknown, mysterious and life-giving force that unites everything. It is being itself. Otto calls it the “*Mysterium Tremendum et Fascinans*” that fills us with awe and terror. Lévinas sees this as provoking the kind of enthusiasm that was provoked in Nazi rallies. The power of the sacred is mysterious, and something that we can only feel or experience.

The numinosity of the sacred transports one beyond one’s own powers and a true liberty is offended by this uncontrollable surplus of power. The numinous annuls the relations between persons by making them participate in a drama where these beings lose their will. As individuals, they are damaged by it. For Judaism, the freedom of the person is damaged by the experience of the sacred. “The sacred that envelopes and transports me is a form of violence.”⁴⁵

Here is one of the places where the mature Lévinas might part roads with Berdyaev. According to Lévinas, the worship of the mere creativity as proposed by Bergson, Berdyaev, and the romantics of the world allow us to accept the horror of the world as merely a necessary “gift” of being. He would agree that Camus rightly attacks Nietzsche’s *amor fati* in *The Rebel*, to accept fate is merely to contemplate the gift and multifariousness of being and then, ultimately, also to side with the masters and executioners against their slaves and victims. This objection is behind the power of Lévinas’s preference for ethics over aesthetics. In Boehme’s metaphor, the *Ungrund* is blind will toward creation – that which cannot remain nothing.⁴⁶ That is to say, creation is the most fundamental feature of reality, it represents the genesis of entities

45) Emmanuel Lévinas, “Religion for Adults” in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Sean Hand (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 14.

46) In Berdyaev’s metaphysical explanation of eschatology, he gives what is about as good a definition of the *Ungrund* and meonic freedom as can be offered. From the explanation below, it is apparent that freedom is necessary to creativity in Berdyaev’s thought.

The *Ungrund*, then, is nothingness, the groundless eye of eternity; and at the same time it is will, not grounded upon anything, bottomless, indeterminate will. But this is a nothingness which is “*Ein Hunger zum Etwas.*” At the same time the *Ungrund* is freedom. In the darkness of the *Ungrund* a fire flames up and this is freedom, meonic, potential freedom. According to Boehme freedom is opposed to nature, but nature emanated from freedom. Freedom is like nothingness, but from it something emanates. The hunger of freedom, of the baseless will for something, must be satisfied.

(Berdyaev, *The Beginning and the End*, 106–107).

from the merely potential, the emergence of novel forms which are more than what is contained immanently in antecedent efficient causes. The new is different and not reducible to that which preceded it.

Berdyaeв attempted to avoid this problem by separating the absolute, which he describes using the *Ungrund* myth, from the person who arises in relation to the *Ungrund*. Berdyaeв seeks to escape being through the myth of a pre-ontological groundlessness that precedes being. The antinomic character of the *Ungrund* is preserved in meonic (non-being, pure potentiality) freedom, and in all products of the source. In God, these antinomies are held in balance in creation: the dialectic of contradiction is the very nature of freedom. Thus, Berdyaeв maintains the notion of the continual birth of God and Being from the *Ungrund*. God, as creator of meaning, continually seeks the creation of meaning from chaos. In creation, the irrational will of the *Ungrund*, the passionate desire of the no-thing to become something, bends itself to the ordering will of God in free response to his call.

The interpretation of the mystery of evil through that of freedom is a supra-rational interpretation and presents reason with an antimony. The source of evil is not in God, nor in a being existing positively side by side with Him ... Thus evil has no basis in anything; it is determined by no possible being and had no ontological origin... The void (the *Ungrund* of Boehme) is not evil ... It conceals within itself the possibility of both good and evil.⁴⁷

God is not the creator of the antinomies. These issue from the actualization of possibility. Evil arises in several possible ways, all of which are rooted in freedom: as the realization of some possibilities to the exclusion of others; as the willful imposition of the self over the Other; as the objectification of freedom and the reduction of the Other to an object; or, as the complete dissolution of order into chaos. The dualism that exists in Berdyaeв's thought is an existential dualism between good and evil, not an ontological one. Hence, evil is real, existentially real, but it is not ultimately or ontologically real. Evil is a possibility rooted in nothing. It is not an essential element of existence, and the logical possibility of its eventual elimination exists.

Thus, Berdyaeв's hope is eschatological the harmony of love is an infinite project, the continually open itself in the imaginative creation of relation between beings.

The *Ungrund*, Lévinas, and the "There Is"

Certainly, Lévinas's phenomenological description of the "there is" in *Existents and Existence* resembles, at least in some respects, Berdyaeв's use of the *Ungrund* myth. The *Il y a* or "there is" is described as a "rumbling silence," it is an impersonal from which we seek to escape. "One can neither say that it is nothingness, even though there is nothing."⁴⁸ Berdyaeв speaks of the incredible sadness of the *Ungrund* or the meon and Lévinas of the "there is" as a horror, a disaster, a stopping of the music to be escaped. In Lévinas's phenomenological descriptions that bring him to the "there is," he approaches through the modalities of fatigue, indolence, and effort. He writes "In this phenomena I showed a dread before being, and impotent recoil, an evasion and consequently, there too, the shadow of the 'there is.'"⁴⁹

But Berdyaeв remains prone to the romantic exaltation of aesthetics over ethics. Berdyaeв's work on Ethics, *The Destiny of Man*, ends with an ethics of creativity that, despite Berdyaeв's ideal of community, is suspiciously

47) Berdyaeв, *Freedom and the Spirit*, 164–165.

48) Emmanuel Lévinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2001), 49.

49) *Ibid.*, 51.

aesthete. One aims at creation and it seems that this could be the creation of works as easily as relation to the other. For Lévinas, the creation of the work of art can give a false sense of the overcoming alienation through the creation of a picture of the world as a harmony.⁵⁰ Indeed, this is his reading of the dangers of eschatology in *Totality and Infinity*. One could easily see the eschatological fulfillment in beautiful totality in which the other disappears. To borrow another image from literature, Heathcliff loves Cathy, but loses her in his vision of his relation to her to only as exclusive of all others but as exclusive of Cathy's own will. Of course, his devotion to Cathy is not simply idolatrous, thus Heathcliff's salvation at the conclusion of *Wuthering Heights*. In a similar respect the eschatologist can become enamored with his story and eschatology ceases to be openness to the call of the other and becomes an aesthetic creation myth. This is the basis of Lévinas's deep suspicion of romanticism and especially the model for Abram's circuitous journey, Hegel. Lévinas argues that all of these romantic positions still end up in the idealist totalization of ontology. Each still places the representation of the ideal of community above the disruption that comes from the call of the Other to me, from the dimension of height. Lévinas's use of the term height is key to his critique of such personalist dialogical existentialists as Marcel, Buber, and Berdyaev. He sees each as still falling into the totality of ontology because each poses an equality with the other that I imaginatively create. Ironically, Lévinas's description of the relation to the other at this point may be closer to Sartre's notion that "hell is other people," than to the dialogical personalists to whom he is often compared. The Other comes to me from the dimension of height and upsets my world. There is no real imagined unity at the end of history.

Lévinas: Ethics and Prophetic Eschatology

As implied in the three part drama that began this paper, Lévinas gives an eschatology. The importance of the last part of the drama for Lévinas is that it goes on. We are always at the moment of decision. I cannot escape ethics into the dream of ontology. He gives us what he calls a prophetic eschatology that is beyond totality. "Eschatology institutes a relation with being beyond the totality or beyond history, and not with being beyond the past and the present."⁵¹ Beyond the totality is not to be described in a merely negative fashion. "It is reflected within the totality and history, within experience. The eschatological, as the 'beyond' of history, draws beings out of the jurisdiction of history and the future; it arouses them in and calls them forth to their full responsibility."⁵² In this sense the Other, who transcends me, who is always beyond my image, founds an ethics that transcends and judges history. This is how Lévinas defines transcendence ethics, in the guise of the disruption caused in my experience by the arrival of the Other person, an upset in my self-love, my private projects. S/He judges my history. "The eschatological notion of judgment (contrary to the judgment of history in which Hegel wrongly saw this rationalization implies that being have an identity 'before' eternity, before the accomplishment of history, before the fullness of time, while there is still time implies that beings exist in relationship, to be sure, but on the basis of themselves and not on the basis of the totality."⁵³ Lévinas's "vision" of eschatology, that he distinguishes from the apocalyptic visions of the positive religions, reveals the very possibility

50) Emmanuel Lévinas, *Reality and Its Shadow*, in Emmanuel Lévinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Hingham, MA: Kluwer, 1987).

51) Emmanuel Lévinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Phillipe Nemo*, trans. Richard Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1995), 22.

52) *Ibid.*, 23.

53) *Ibid.*

of eschatology, that is, the breach of the totality, the possibility of a significations without a context.”⁵⁴ Ethics breaks in on history from the beyond, not from the divine realm of an ideal, a theological first principle, or Being beyond being, but from the everydayness of the face of another person. The story never gets to finish, though its meaning is before us in the imploring gesture of the other person. Thus “Of peace there can be only an eschatology... It means, first of all, that peace take place in the objective history disclosed by war, as the end of that war or as the end of history.”⁵⁵

54) Ibid.

55) Ibid., 24.

Bibliography:

- Abrams, Meyer Howard. *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1973.
- Bailey, Margaret Lewis. *Milton and Jacob Boehme: A Study in German Mysticism in XVII Century England*. 1914. Reprint, New York: Haskell House, 1964.
- Berdyayev, Nicolas. "Deux études sur Jacob Boehme." In Boehme, *Mystérium Magnum*, Tome I. Paris: Aubier, 1945.
- *Dostoevsky: An Interpretation*. New York: Semantron Press, 2009.
- *Essai de Métaphysique Eschatologique*. Translated by Maxime Herman. Paris: Aubier, 1946.
- *Freedom and the Spirit*. Translated by Oliver Fielding Clarke. New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1972.
- *Slavery and Freedom*. Translated by Reginald Michael French. New York: Charles Scribners, 1944.
- Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *Notes from the Underground*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1992.
- Hegel, G.W.F. *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, vol. III. Translated by E.S. Haldane. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1955.
- Jones, Rufus. *Spiritual Reformers of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1959.
- Koyré, Alexandre. *La Philosophie de Jacob Boehme*. New York: Burt Franklin, 1968.
- Lévinas, Emmanuel. *De L'Evasion*. Paris: Fata Morgana, 1982.
- *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Phillippe Nemo*. Translated by Richard Cohen. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1995.
- *Existence and Existents*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2001.
- "Reality and Its Shadow." In *Collected Philosophical Papers*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Hingham, MA: Kluwer, 1987.
- "Religion for Adults," in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*. Translated by Sean Hand. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997.
- Review of *Kierkegaard et la Philosophie existentielle*, by Lev Shestov. *Revue des Études Juives* 1, nos. 1–2 (1937): 139–41.
- *Of God Who Comes to Mind*. Translated by Bettina Bergo. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998.
- *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969.
- Plato, *The Symposium*, in *The Works of Plato*. Translated by Benjamin Jowett. New York: The Dial Press, 1936.
- Schelling, F. W. J. von. *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*. Translated by Jeff Love and Johannes Schmidt. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006.
- Shestov, Lev. *Athens and Jerusalem*. Translated by Bernard Martin. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1966.
- *Dostoevsky and Nietzsche: The Philosophy of Tragedy*. Translated by Spencer Roberts, in *Lev Shestov, Dostoevsky*,

Tolstoy and Nietzsche. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1969.

— *Potestas Clavium*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1968.

Wahl, Jean et al., “Subjectivité et Transcendance, Séance de Samedi 4 décembre 1937,” in *Bulletin de la Société Française de Philosophie* 37, no. 5 (Octobre-Décembre, 1937).

Weeks, Andrew. *Boehme: An Intellectual Biography of the Seventeenth-Century Philosopher and Mystic*. Albany: NY, State University of New York Press, 1991.

Wyschogrod, Edith. *Emmanuel Lévinas: The Problem of Ethical Metaphysics*, 2nd edition. New York: Fordham University Press, 2000.

— “God and ‘Being’s Move’ in the Philosophy of Emmanuel Lévinas,” in *The Journal of Religion*, vol. 62, no. 2, (Apr. 1982): 145–55.