The Later Heidegger and the Later Levinas in the Time of the Coronavirus

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ABSTRACT: This article addresses the many ways the philosophies of the later Heidegger and the later Levinas speak to us in the time of the coronavirus pandemic. I argue that the pause in the world's busy industrial life provides an ideal opportunity for what Heidegger called meditative thinking. The pandemic is also a time both of extreme bodily vulnerability and of extraordinary ethical responsibility for others, and so causes us to hear Levinas' extreme language in *Otherwise than Being* about anarchic ethical responsibility and the self as a hostage in a very different way.

KEYWORDS: Heidegger, Levinas, coronavirus, meditative thinking, ethical responsibility

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The time of the coronavirus is an extraordinary time in many ways. It is for many people a terrible time of suffering and death. It is also a time where for millions of people there is a significant pause in their usually very hectic lives, a pause many people fill – without really thinking about it, automatically – with various forms of technology. It is also a time of unusual awareness of our own bodily vulnerability and of the bodily vulnerability of all others. This makes this a time not only of supercharged anxiety over own vulnerability but also of supercharged ethical responsibility for others. For these and for several other reasons, two philosophers who speak to us directly and powerfully in this extreme time of the pandemic are Heidegger and Levinas. Here I try to lay out the many ways in which the very different but both powerful philosophical voices of, more specifically, the later Heidegger and the later Levinas speak to us most compellingly in our own extreme situation of the Coronavirus pandemic.

Slow. Pause. Stop. For some people life during the coronavirus pandemic is even crazier, more hectic, more stressful than normal, as millions of people around the globe ask: how do I go to work every day and have my kids home from school at the same time? For millions of others in America and around the world, to the contrary, this is a time of slowing, pausing, perhaps even stopping. All of a sudden, millions of people are not rushing to work every morning and not going out to crowded, fun places like restaurants, parties, theatres, sports stadiums. Instead, we are all indoors, many of us indoors all day, and our normal lives have completely slowed, paused, even stopped.

Such a time would make many of us think about one philosopher more than any other: Heidegger. He loved times of slow, pause, stop. He frequently talked about famers slowly, thoughtfully plowing the fields, shepherds patiently watching the flock, people slowing walking through a forest on only a rude path or no path. Probably his favorite image of slow, pause, stop is a heavy snowfall that causes everything to slow and stop and forces everyone inside for a few days.[1] Our first response as contemporary people to such a situation may well be a sigh of relief as we say to ourselves "Netflix!" Heidegger, of course, was thinking

of his own situation seventy or eighty years ago in his cabin in Germany's Black Forest when the snow falls and doesn't stop, and makes it impossible to go out, and so everything slows and stops and you are inside for days not only with no internet but no TV, no radio.[2]

Probably most contemporary Americans and millions of others in the economically developed world would respond to Heidegger's technology-free, stopped situation with something like Kurtz's "the horror, the horror." So many of us have been thrust into this terrible situation of slow, pause, stop by the coronavirus, and how many of us have thought: "Thank God in this situation we have cable TV, the DVD player, the Roku, the internet, Facebook, Youtube, etc."? So much technology separates us trapped inside in the time of quarantine from Heidegger trapped inside the cabin by the snow, yet that very fact is part of why Heidegger's later philosophy haunts us right now. After all, it was Heidegger who proclaimed, starting in the 1940s, that our age was dominated by technology and that living with more and more technology and more and more changes to how we live because of new technologies was the destiny of the age of Being in which we all live.[3]

Since Heidegger said the continuing increase of technology was the destiny of Being in our age, you might think he would have loved to have Netflix in that cabin. But Heidegger haunts us now also because he loved the slow, the pause, the stop times. He saw in such rare times great opportunity. He said that when things do slow, pause, and stop, this is the time, probably the best time, for what he called thinking.

Thinking? Aren't we always thinking? Even when we are watching memes on YouTube we are thinking! Heidegger loved the opportunity that was opened up by the slow, pause, stop times for what he said was a different type of thinking than the thinking we usually do. Our usual type of thinking Heidegger called "business-like, calculative thinking," which is dominated by the concept of things. We are always thinking of things, things we have to do or want to do, things we have, things we purchase, things we experience. Even when we watch memes on YouTube, we watch things and a series of things and think of them as a thing. Technology too, Heidegger says, we think of merely as a

thing and a collection of things, new toys for us to play with, but we never take the time to think about what technology really is in its essence. Hence the value of times of times of slow, pause, stop. They are a great opportunity, says Heidegger, to do a different type of thinking which is itself slower, more contemplative, and not dominated by the thing and things. This other type of thinking is quiet, slow, thoughtful reflection on what is happening, on what we are experiencing, and how it is changing our lives, changing us. This very different and slow, thoughtful, thinking about what is happening and about its meaning and significance Heidegger called meditative thinking.[4]

The ghost of Heidegger haunts us with this essential question: now that the coronavirus has pressed the pause button on the world and caused so many of us to slow and even stop, now that we are separated from the normal crazy rush of our lives, now that at least many of us have time, free time, empty time, do we automatically grab on to contemporary technology to fill that empty time? Or can we take the empty time as an opportunity to have quiet, to think slowly and patiently about what this all means, about what has happened to us and to our societies and to the world itself? Do we take the time, even when we have time to do what Heidegger calls meditative thinking?

The later Heidegger frequently wrote about danger. He has a famous lecture titled "The Danger," in the essay "The Question Concerning Technology" he writes of "the supreme danger," and this line from Holderlin – "where danger is, there the saving power too grows strong" – was probably the quotation Heidegger cited most frequently (GA 7: 35/QCT 28, tm).[5] Certainly, one danger Heidegger saw in a future increasingly dominated by technology was that various forms of technology as they are created would rush in and fill all the empty spaces of our lives. He feared that in future ages even more dominated by technology than his own age that the very possibility of meditative thinking would be endangered.

This slowing, even stopping time of the pandemic is such a great opportunity to think meditatively, as Heidegger would say, and certainly we have so much to think about. Perhaps first and foremost, this

gives us the chance to think about all the forms of technology that we grab on to. Has there ever been a better time for us to slow down and really think about, for example, how various forms of technology in the age of the internet have changed our human lives, hurt and helped us, damaged and saved us? Surely now we really need to use the time not just to grab on to whatever technology is out there but to think about what we are doing as we grab. What are the forms of technology that have really helped us in this crisis? That have helped us stay connected to the most important people in our lives who are physically separated from us? What are the forms of technology that have enabled us to continue our professional and working lives, to stay productive and creative? What are the forms of technology that have helped us educate and stimulate the minds of our children, and have helped us understand what is happening to the world during this pandemic? Conversely, what forms of technology have we grabbed on to that really do little or nothing for us and waste our time, steal it from us without return? What are the forms of entertainment that really entertain and enrich, and what forms of entertainment steal time and deaden the mind and the senses? To what extent have we filled the empty spaces of time created by the pandemic with various forms of technology, with new toys, and to what extent have we done this automatically, unthinkingly?

This slow, patient, meditative thinking about our contemporary human lives in relation to new technologies – important as that is – is just the beginning of what we have to think about during this extraordinary time of slow, pause, stop. This time for so many people in the world has lasted and is lasting a great deal longer than Heidegger's few days in the cabin due to his beloved heavy snowfall. It has lasted and will last so long that many people have literally been thrust out of their ordinary lives and thrust into a new situation and a new way of being, and for many people this may make them reconsider their priorities, give them a new sense of the most important things in life. Many people, thrust into this situation, may fully embrace and appreciate, for example, the opportunity to be more involved in the educational lives of their children. Many people might feel liberated from a life dominated

by work, work pressures, commuting time, long working hours. Many people may grow into a deeper sense of all that they could be, could do, could enjoy if they had a life that was not so dominated by work. Certainly, many people in this extraordinary situation of slow, pause, stop have found fulfillment and joy in many activities—like gardening, taking walks, playing ball with the kids, reading, talking more with their family members and friends, listening to music, doing art—that in their normal, hectic lives they simply do not have time for or do not take the time for. Certainly, many people are going to emerge from this with something like a reordering of priorities, new desires, a deeper sense of what is essential and what is inessential in life, but these thoughts and desires will remain inchoate if we do not give ourselves time to think. To think meditatively about what has happened and is happening and how we feel about it and how it is affecting us and how we wish to respond, all of this profound thinking is both what is extremely necessary right now in this extraordinary time and is what Heidegger called meditative thinking.

We also need to meditate on what is happening now to death, funerals, and mourning during this pandemic. Death now is even more horrible than it usually is. Friends and family members of people seriously ill with the virus have to surrender their loved ones at the doors of the hospital and leave. Those battling COVID-19 and those succumbing to it do so without the physical presence of any loving family members. Those who die literally die alone, and those left behind are left with the reality of this unusual and unusually cruel situation of knowing that they could not be there when their loved ones died. And during this time, because of the social distancing required by the pandemic, there are no public funerals. Not only is there is no being with the dying of loved ones, but also no coming together as a community to mourn the dead. Death and mourning have been profoundly changed, and certainly one important thing we need to do during the slow, pause, stop of the time of this pandemic is to think more slowly and thoughtfully about death and suffering, about guilt, grief, and mourning. Even if no one close to us has died during this pandemic, many people have died and

have largely gone unmourned. How do we come through this pandemic and out on the other side of it open to mourning its victims and open to sharing the suffering of our fellow citizens who have not only lost loved ones but lost the opportunity to publicly mourn them? Of course this pandemic will bring incredible suffering not just to some of our friends and neighbors and our fellow citizens, but to the entire world. As I write this, the country with the most victims of COVID-19, partly due to the astounding incompetence of the Trump administration, is the U.S. Things may get even worse in the U.S. and the death toll now exceeds 100,000, but the death toll in many countries in the less economically developed world may well eclipse what happens in the U.S. The coronavirus will wreak incredible devastation in parts of the world where social distancing is impossible and where not going to work, most often in very crowded circumstances, is not an option because it means mass starvation. Already in Ecuador, for example, the *New York Times* reports that corpses are stacked up in the streets, in a way that is horribly reminiscent of the 1918 Spanish Influenza that may have killed as many as 100 million people worldwide.[6] In Ecuador, the real death toll may be fifteen times higher than their government's official total, and this is just one clear example of the suffering the virus will bring to the world's citizens. Surely this pandemic is one of those extraordinary events that calls us to think much more often than we usually do about suffering, death, and mourning, and about how they are unjustly and unequally spread throughout the world, and calls us to do what Heidegger would name meditative thinking, which we can do if we give ourselves time to do it.

Meditative thinking about death, suffering, and mourning during the slow, pause, stop time of the pandemic may even open up something like meditative mourning for the planet itself. The world's people can see the destruction and damage that our crazy, hectic lives and the dominance of business-like, calculative thinking that renders the planet itself as simply a thing for our own uses inflict not only on our own human lives but on the planet itself.[7] Perhaps the most amazing thing that is happening now during the slow, pause, stop of the pandemic is

that with the world's economies and industries suddenly slowed down significantly, paused, or stopped, the world's people can see a planet with significantly less destruction caused by incessant human and industrial/corporate action. Everyone can look at visual images of planet Earth significantly freer of pollution. People in cities are seeing a night sky filled with stars like they have never seen before. People in cities in Northern India can see the Himalayas for the first time. People nearly everywhere can see a clearer, less polluted sky and breathe significantly less polluted air, all because the mad rush of our normal lives has been brought to a slow, pause, stop by the coronavirus. This pandemic time gives everyone the clearest and the best opportunity we have ever had to think about how different the planet is with significantly less human and industrial/corporate action upon it. Perhaps as we understand this more profoundly, more meditatively, we will experience inside of ourselves more urgency to find other and better ways to work, to make our living, to live, that are less harmful to the planet.

If we can take the time to do this kind of meditative thinking in terms of the planet itself, we may grow into that deeper awareness that the later Heidegger experienced when he insisted not only that humans dominate the planet through our science and our incredible technology, but that humans are also responsible for the health and ongoing life and wellbeing of the planet. Humans, the later Heidegger famously wrote many times, are the guardians and the shepherds of Being, called to guard and protect Being itself. This extraordinary time of personal, economic and industrial slow, pause, stop can bring to us the deep awareness that even if we continue this unprecedented and unbelievable period of economic inactivity far longer than anyone of us would desire, this still would not reverse the myriad problems of climate change. Even if we continue this extraordinary life we are living now, the planet we live on is still radically endangered.

"Where danger is, there the saving power too grows strong," quotes the later Heidegger, over and over. Really? What saving power? Who is going to save us from the planetary danger that is climate change? Surely, only humans can save us. Perhaps during this time of slow, pause,

stop we can grow meditatively into a deeper understanding of what Heidegger called the danger and why he stated that if we humans are to avoid the greatest dangers, we must come to understand ourselves as the guardians and the shepherds of Being.

Right now, at this very moment, another philosopher it is almost impossible not to hear is Emmanuel Levinas. During this extraordinary time of pandemic, when we are all fearful not only of contracting the virus ourselves and of unknowingly giving it to our loved ones but also of giving it to others, even to complete strangers, how can we not think of that great philosopher of the self's ethical responsibility to the other person, and of his now famous work from 1961, *Totality and Infinity*?[8]

Certainly, the Levinas that has become infused into contemporary culture at this point with its continuous talk of otherness and ethical responsibility to the other is the beautiful and poetic voice of the Levinas of *Totality and Infinity*. This is the voice that describes and declares over and over again how the self is called to ethics, goodness, justice, and peace by the Face of the Other, this repetition that renders that text not only like the waves crashing on the shore, as Derrida says, but also as a beautiful crescendo repeated in a symphony.[9] This sometimes majestic voice of the Levinas of *Totality and Infinity* is certainly the Levinas that has become widely known, and is certainly still the Levinas most known and discussed, even by the always growing crowd of Levinas scholars, let alone by everyone else.[10]

But an extraordinary thing happens with Levinas' ghost during this extraordinary time of the pandemic. It prompts us to move beyond that majestic voice of *Totality and Infinity* and to that later, so much more haunting and troubling voice of the Levinas of the great text of 1974, *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*.[11] It is this very different, later Levinas that speaks to us most powerfully at this very moment. The voice of this later Levinas haunts us in several startling ways during the long ordeal of this pandemic. It might not even be too much to say that because of this pandemic we hear the haunting voice of the later Levinas in a very different way than before the pandemic.

Levinas' later work, and especially its supreme manifestation in the extraordinary and perplexing *Otherwise than Being* is very different from the earlier work. In *Otherwise than Being*, gone is the narrative structure of *Totality and Infinity*, with its movement of how the self goes from reducing power to ethical consciousness through the infinity of the Other, and its rhythm leading to repetitive, majestic crescendos. As Paul Ricoeur and other commentators have noticed, *Otherwise than Being* does not advance from argument to argument, but incessantly repeats its argument about anarchic responsibility through an extraordinary series of metaphors and tropes.[12] The metaphors and tropes change, but the argument doesn't. *Otherwise than Being* repeats its arguments so strenuously that, as Susan Handelman says, the text is battering.[13]

In *Otherwise than Being* the overriding question is not about the effect of the face of the other on the self but is a prior question: why is the human subject penetrable, porous, penetrated by ethical responsibility from the first, even before the first? The most essential term Levinas introduces to explain this is *anarchy*, a beginning that could be reassembled into my own time. I cannot trace my responsibility back to the very origins of my own time. Responsibility is before me, before my time. Ethical responsibility is anarchic, prior to my own choosing, even to my own time. "The word I," says Levinas, "means here I am, answering for everything and everyone."[14] The I is the site of a responsibility I have but did not choose, that does not come to me as an act of my own freedom or action. "I am obliged without this obligation having begun in me, as if an order slipped into my consciousness like a thief, smuggled itself in."[15]

Levinas, in this later text, incessantly repeats this argument about the anarchic and inescapable nature of ethical responsibility that is beyond both my own time and my own choosing, through an extraordinary and often extraordinarily harsh set of metaphors and tropes. He employs a remarkable, and at least what seems like a remarkably hyperbolic vocabulary to elaborate on this amazing notion of subjectivity as anarchically ethically responsible: *naked, vulnerable, open, denuded, exposure, election, maternity, inspiration, obsession, the other in one's skin,*

hostage, smuggled, burgled, hunted down, persecution.[16] This language prompts many, if not most readers of *Otherwise than Being* to ask the exact question Paul Ricoeur asks so confoundingly: "Why such extreme terms?"[17] These extreme terms led Ricoeur to describe *Otherwise than Being* as "verbal terrorism."[18]

Nevertheless, in this extreme situation of the COVID-19 pandemic, this later, more extreme Levinas of *Otherwise than Being* and after with its verbal terrorism, is what speaks to us most powerfully, the voice that haunts us most compellingly, in our own extreme situation. We hear Levinas's extreme language differently in this extreme time of the coronavirus. I argue that the ghost of the later Levinas speaks to us powerfully right now in the age of COVID-19 in at least six ways:

1. Levinas's description of how ethical responsibility renders the self a hostage.
2. His concept of *an-archē* and the anarchical nature of ethical responsibility that weighs on the self.
3. Levinas's extreme language of the other in my own skin.
4. His concept of inspiration and the breath of the other in me and his rather strange metaphor of the subject as a lung.
5. The later Levinas's reinterpretation of saintliness as the self's taking its ethical responsibility to its extreme point of dying for the other.
6. What he suggests about the relation between responsibility for the other carried out to the extreme point and what he calls "a certain weakness" and his critical thoughts about what he calls "virile virtues."

One of Levinas' more extreme and most often employed metaphors in *Otherwise than Being* is the metaphor of the hostage. The self is taken hostage against its will by its ethical responsibilities: "The self is through and through a hostage, older than the ego, prior to principles."[19] This is one of those metaphors that before the pandemic would probably strike most readers as a bit strange, extreme, but in the age of the pandemic we hear it differently. Indeed, will we ever hear Levinas's language of hostage the same way that we did before the pandemic,

before the current time when for so many of us our own lives took on the strange character of being a hostage? In the era of social distancing and when so many of us are in quarantine and under strict orders not only about social interaction but even about going outside our own dwellings, all of a sudden we feel like we are a hostage. And why are we living like a hostage during the pandemic? Certainly, this has something to do with the desire to safeguard ourselves and our loved ones. Certainly, this has something to do with the power of the State to impose orders upon us to restrict the spread of the virus. But just as surely this also has something to do with our concern for others, for any others, our ethical commitment to not make others ill by unknowingly spreading the virus to them. Certainly part of the danger we are all in now is that we may ourselves have the virus without even knowing it, so part of the reason we accept this strange, hostage-like existence is that it is what we have to do to live out our real ethical concern for the Other, for all others, even for complete strangers. This extreme situation now of not only living more like a hostage than we ever thought we would, but also of accepting this hostage-like existence not only for our own sake but for the sake of others, makes Levinas's oft-repeated hostage language in OTB seem not so extreme after all. How can it be extreme if it is an apt description of what many of us and millions of people around the world are actually doing?

Another extremely important notion Levinas unfolds in *Otherwise than Being* that haunts us now is all that he means by the notion of *an-arche*. The self cannot trace the origin of the sense of ethical responsibility back to a source in me, in my own decision. I have a responsibility I did not really choose, and I feel ethical responsibility for situations in the world I could not possibly have caused, that have their origins in no actions of mine. As Catherine Chalier rightly says, for Levinas "responsibility is an obsession that comes from a past that man does not remember."[20] We feel dread at the incredible toll this pandemic will wreak upon human beings in poorer parts of the world, where people often live in extremely crowded spaces with no access to health care and are completely vulnerable and unprotected from the terrible ravages of

COVID-19. There is no doubt that during this difficult time the weight of all the injustices of the world weighs more heavily on us even than it usually does, this despite the fact that the origin of the world's many injustices cannot be traced back to our actions.

Certainly, in an American context, this pandemic is showing us every minute of the day the weight of injustices that weigh upon us even though they don't have as their origin our actions. Levinas in *Totality and Infinity* criticizes what he calls "politics left to itself,"[21] and in America we might say we have "capitalism left to itself." For example, in America, and unlike all other advanced economies, millions of our fellow citizens confront this pandemic without health insurance and without any access to healthcare at all, and so their bodies are much more vulnerable than others. As America's most prominent Levinasian public intellectual, Judith Butler, has said: "this is the stunning cruelty of the U.S. that shocks large portions of the world."[22] In the U.S., as in many other countries, this pandemic is revealing the fundamental truth that though all human bodies are vulnerable to the lethality of the virus, because of long-standing injustices some bodies are much more vulnerable than other bodies. This pandemic is, in the United States, killing disproportionately brown and black bodies of ethnic minorities and of native Americans. The working poor and many of those employed in vital yet low-paying jobs such as grocery clerks, bus drivers, workers in meat processing plants, agriculture workers, or sanitation workers do not have the luxury of staying home and not working for weeks or months at a time, or of working online, and so must risk their lives simply to live and to feed their families and to provide for the rest of us essential, but often very low-paying services. The incredible weight of our racist past, slavery, Jim Crow, and systemic racism means that disproportionately the working poor and people in vital yet low-paying jobs are racial minorities. They also disproportionately live in more polluted areas of the country, so their lungs are more susceptible to the havoc of the virus and their bodies are more vulnerable, their lives more precarious, and they are dying in greater numbers. The entire heavy weight of racism and of capitalism left to itself weighs heavily on

us even more obviously during this time of pandemic than it usually does, a weight we feel upon us even though we know it doesn't have its origins in our own time.[23] During this time of pandemic we hear Levinas's voice telling us incessantly that the weight of ethical responsibility is both anarchic and real at the same time: "The self is a sub-jectum; it is under the weight of the universe, responsible for everything."[24]

Another extreme metaphor Levinas uses in *Otherwise than Being* that may have seemed extreme but does not seem so extreme now is his language of "the other in one's skin." Levinas says we feel our ethical responsibility to others as if the other is in our own skin. Does not this metaphor Levinas employs take on a disturbingly haunting resonance in the age of COVID-19? Levinas in *Otherwise than Being* is not only arguing against our dominant view of the self as separate and independent, but he is trying to break its hold over our thinking, which he tries to do with the incessant battering and verbal terrorism that is *Otherwise than Being*. The other person is not only not separate from us, but in our skin; human subjectivity is inescapably exposed and porous. The pandemic teaches us how true that is. As Judith Butler has said, the pandemic awakens us to a deeper realization of this fact of human interconnectedness, vulnerability, and porosity: "the human trace that someone leaves on an object may well be what I touch, pass along on another surface or take into my body." Humans "share the surfaces of the world. They touch what others have touched and they touch each other. These reciprocal and material modes of sharing describe a crucial dimension of our vulnerability."[25] The other's vulnerable bodily existence is inside of us. Surely, the virus has awakened us all to the truth of what Levinas is saying here. We are not separate and independent. We all touch the same surfaces and what we touch can go in the other; our porosity and vulnerability are both dangerous and excruciatingly real. The fact that we are not separate and not independent is so true and so real at this very moment that it is as if the other person were in our very skin, which is, of course, the very real truth Levinas literally tries to hammer home in *Otherwise than Being*.

Levinas uses the metaphor of inspiration throughout *Otherwise than Being*, but he does not develop it or connect it to breath and lung until

the last section, titled "The Outside."[26] This last section focuses on the subject's relation to the outside. Here Levinas moves through several references to Heidegger and through rather famous Heideggerian metaphors of openness and disclosure, but Levinas of course will lead us to think this relation in an explicitly non-Heideggerian way, asking "Can openness have another signification than disclosure?"[27] Of course we know by now that the other way Levinas is thinking the self's openness to the outside is exposure, even "exposure of exposed-ness,"[28] a word and a metaphor Levinas employs many times in *Otherwise than Being*.

This description of the subject's openness to the outside as exposure leads him, quite reasonably enough, to think further about his previously used metaphor of inspiration and to connect it in this concluding section more directly to the very physical reality of breathing and lungs. Can there be a better corporal metaphor for the self's exposure to the outside than breathing, inspiration, lungs? And can there be a more haunting metaphor in the time of COVID-19? The lung's exposure to the outside in breathing, taking the outside inside, not only thinks the subject's relation to the outside in a different way than disclosure, but also deconstructs the contrast between inside and outside. In breathing the outside is the inside, the lungs inside become filled with what is outside and then exhale the inside outside. And, of course, given that Levinas' point in *Otherwise than Being* has always been that the subject is already exposure to the other, anarchically exposure to the other, he says remarkably but also somewhat predictably: the subject "could be a lung at the bottom of its substance." The subject breathes the outside inside, and though the subject most often is hard at work constructing the independent self, it is constantly undone, and, correspondingly, constantly lives as exposure with, as you might say, every breath.

This concluding section titled "The Outside," with its language of exposure, breathing and lungs, is especially haunting during this time of the pandemic. We do feel that our bodily existence has been reduced down to being exposure, and that we have all in some way become a lung continually exposed to the possibly contaminated air both outside and continually inside us. We experience ourselves during this

extraordinary time much more than we usually do or probably ever did as pure exposure, literally as a lung. We are not only much more conscious of taking the breath of the other person inside of us, but we are very wary of it and actively try to stay away from it. We wear masks to protect ourselves because we are essentially exposed and inescapably an exposed lung. This is an incredible time supercharged with our own desire to protect ourselves from others, whom we keep at least six feet away from us so their breath is not inside us.

But this time of supercharged self-preservation is also an extraordinary time of supercharged ethical responsibility. During this pandemic people around the world are going to extraordinary lengths not only to protect themselves but to protect others, even complete strangers. Why is this happening? Why do people feel responsible for other people? It is as if people feel ethically obligated to protect not only their own lungs, but the lungs of the other, as if concern for the other is mysteriously inside them just as the breath of other people is inescapably but invisibly inside of us. This breath of the other in us as ethical responsibility to the other is precisely what Levinas calls inspiration, the inspiration of the other in me, the breathing of the other in me, the other's ethical breath in me, breathing in me. This inspiration is, of course, anarchic, beyond and before my own choosing. It lives inside of me beyond my own choice, just like the breath of the other person.

In these final pages of *Otherwise than Being,* Levinas says something extraordinary about inspiration, ethical responsibility for the other breathing in me. He discusses the possibility of the subject sustaining ethical responsibility, continuing to breathe with and through the breath of the other, one's breath as breath for the other, what he calls "the longest breath." A human being can live with inspiration, ethical commitment to the other, without end, can live one's life for the other, substituting and sacrificing oneself for the other: "Is man not the living being capable of the longest breath in inspiration, without a stopping point, and in expiration, without return?"[29] Levinas ends this often troubling book by testifying to the fact that there is even in this violent world an absolute breathing for, living for, even dying for the other. There is, he says, "inspiration to the end, even to expiration."[30]

At the end of the often brutalizing experience of reading *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas leaves us with the beautiful recognition that there are those who live their ethical responsibilities to others as if with every breath, who live and die for others, who live the truth of "inspiration to the end, even to expiration." This complete dedication to the other, living for, breathing for, dying for the other became a definite preoccupation for the later Levinas, and he most often referred to it in his later work as saintliness. Certainly, another way Levinas is with us in this horrible pandemic has everything to do with the way the later Levinas redefined the concept of saintliness. Levinas's re-definition is entirely in an ethical direction and really has nothing to do with theological beliefs of those who live in this saintly way.[31] To live constantly split open by the many ethical responsibilities to many others, to dedicate one's self to the fulfillment of these infinite responsibilities that are impossible to fulfill, to do this even up to its extreme point, to sacrifice one's self for the sake of others, to spend one's life in the service of others and even to lose one's life in this way, "inspiration to the end, even to expiration" – this, Levinas says, is saintliness.[32]

We all know throughout this pandemic we are not only surrounded by suffering and death but have also been surrounded by risking oneself for others, even dying for others, exactly what Levinas said is saintliness. At the very beginning of this novel coronavirus there was the Chinese physician Dr. Li Wenliang, who first warned his fellow doctors of this new virus and was threatened for this by the authorities, and who, after treating several patients with the virus, contracted it and died from it himself. More than one hundred doctors in Italy and more than 300 in Russia have died of the virus while trying to save their patients' lives, and countless other medical personnel around the world have done this as well.[33] People in many countries around the world have tried in many ways to express gratitude for the medical personnel literally risking their lives to help their patients. In the country where I currently live, Romania, a group of artists and advertising companies started a "Thank you, doctors" campaign featuring posters with iconographic images of medical personnel in masks portrayed as saints. The Romanian Orthodox Church has condemned them as blasphemous and

the government has ruled that they must be taken down. This cannot change the fact that citizens in Romania and all around the world are aware of the risks that medical personnel are taking to combat the virus; we all know that this difficult time is also a time when people are taking their ethical responsibilities to the extreme point, and are living for and even dying for their ethical responsibilities to others. The voice of the later Levinas speaks to us all in this situation, and says to us that what we are seeing and what we all feel the need to express our admiration and gratitude for – without any reference to any theology – is what he calls saintliness.

And one other extremely important thing we hear from the later Levinas right now in our own extreme situation is an intelligent question he raises at the end of the book. Life lived for others, breathed for others, living for, dying for, inspiration to the point of expiration – all that he will come to call saintliness – do we want to think all this through what he calls "the virile virtues" such as bravery, strength, power, manliness? Virtues that have an inescapable connection to violence and are, as Levinas points out, continually consecrated by and through war? Levinas at the end of OTB leads our thinking elsewhere, asking us to think about what he calls "a certain weakness"[34] and "a relaxation of virility without cowardice."[35] Levinas's question is especially haunting to those of us who are Americans, since Trump seems to have no other way to understand this pandemic crisis than as a war and he continually refers to the medical professionals who are risking their lives to protect their patients as "warriors." Trump may understand fighting-for; he is completely in the dark about living for, breathing for, suffering for, even dying for the other – everything that Levinas will call saintliness. Levinas's question and suggestions are hauntingly profound in the long and difficult situation of this pandemic. Do we really want to think of those who are living and dying in service to others as warriors? Is this the time, when so many of our sisters and brothers are living for the other up to the limit of even dying for the other – when there is so much saintliness – to worship once again the virile virtues that show themselves in war? Or can we think strength differently if we think of a strength that pours itself out in service to the other, even to

an extreme point of becoming a certain type of weakness? And can we think of what it might mean to avoid consecrating virile virtues and, instead, to live out of "a relaxation of virility without cowardice?"

Heidegger and Levinas were two extremely different people who drew inspiration from some similar but some very different traditions and developed very different philosophies. Levinas, though he was Heidegger's student, is never considered and never should be considered as one of Heidegger's Jewish children. He knew of his former teacher's Nazism from its beginning, and for Levinas there was no forgetting or forgiving either Heidegger's Nazism or his silence regarding the six million, to whom Levinas dedicated *Otherwise than Being*.[36] Out of his *Auseinandersetzung* with Heidegger, he developed an oeuvre that is both heavily influenced by Heidegger and at the same time explicitly counter to and otherwise than Heidegger, an oeuvre that now has to be considered the most important religious philosophy of our time. While Levinas saw himself as, and certainly was in many ways, an anti-Heideggerian, he nonetheless regarded Heidegger as an extremely important philosopher and regarded *Being and Time* as one of the four or five most important works in the history of western philosophy.

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We all live today with both of these philosophical giants, Heidegger and Levinas. We inherit their profound thinking, and as opposed in many ways as they are, there is no sense of choosing between them, no either/or. We still hear their voices and need their insights, and this long ordeal of the pandemic is a long lesson in how true that is. This extraordinary time of pandemic calls us all not just to grab on to forms of technology but to think wisely and well about technology and about ourselves, about how we wish to live. This pandemic time also forces us to confront bodily vulnerability, our own and everyone else's, and the real but in some ways inexplicable fact of our ethical responsibility to other people, even to strangers. No wonder that two philosophers who speak most powerfully, even hauntingly, right now are Martin Heidegger and Emmanuel Levinas.

NOTES

1 See, for example, Heidegger's essay "Why Do I Stay in the Provinces?" in *Heidegger: The Man and the Thinker,* ed. Thomas Sheehan (New York: Routledge, 2017). GA 13: 9–14

2 For more on Heidegger's life in the cabin see Adam Sharr's book *Heidegger's Hut* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006).

3 See especially the title essay and other essays in the collection titled *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays,* trans. William Lovitt (New York: HarperCollins, 2013).

4 See *What is Called Thinking?*, trans. J. Glenn Gray (New York: Harper & Row, 1976). Also see several of the essays in *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings,* ed. David Krell (London: Routledge, 2010). To obtain a view into how Heidegger's thinking about thinking was developing in the '30s see his *Country Path Conversations,* trans. Bret Davis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018).

5 See Heidegger's *Bremen and Freiburg Lectures,* trans. Andrew Mitchell (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012). Also *Ethics and Danger: Essays on Heidegger and Continental Thought,* ed. Arleen Dallery and Charles Scott (New York: SUNY Press, 1992). See also Chapter 5, titled "Does Rescue Also Grow?", in David Krell's important work *ecstasy catastrophe: Heidegger from "Being and Time" to the Black Notebooks* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2015).

6 José María León Cabrera and Anatoly Kurmanaev, "Ecuador's Death Toll During Outbreak is Among the Worst in the World" in *The New York Times,* April 23, 2020.

7 Several of the contributors to the fine volume titled *Heidegger on Technology*, edited by Aaron Wendland, Christopher Merwin, and Christos Hadjioannou (New York: Routledge, 2019), address the planetary dimensions of Heidegger's thinking about the essence of technology. See also Michael Zimmerman's *Heidegger's Confrontation with Modernity: Technology, Politics, and Art* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990). For an extremely intelligent, feminist reading of Heidegger on technology and how

his insights can be applied to reproductive and birthing technologies see Dana Belu's *Heidegger, Reproductive Technology, and the Motherless Age* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

8 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969).

9 See Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics" in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 79–153.

10 A prime example of this tendency for even the more recent generation of Levinas scholars to focus on *Totality and Infinity* much more than *Otherwise than Being* is Samuel Moyn's *Origins of the Other: Emmanuel Levinas Between Revelation and Ethics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005). In many ways this is a fine book, but it attempts to make an argument about Levinas as a religious philosopher without discussing *Otherwise than Being*, which, remarkably, is not even listed in the book's bibliography.

11 Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998).

12 Ricoeur says of *Otherwise than Being*: "there is no notable progression in its argument." Ricoeur, "Otherwise: A Reading of Emmanuel Levinas's *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*," *Yale French Studies* 104 (2004): 82–99.

13 Susan Handelman, *Fragments of Redemption: Jewish Thought and Literary Theory in Benjamin, Scholem, and Levinas* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 180.

14 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 114.

15 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 13.

16 Levinas very honestly says in *Otherwise than Being*, p. 19, that "the different concepts that come up in the attempt to state transcendence echo one another."

17 Ricoeur, "Otherwise," 93.

18 Ricoeur, "Otherwise," 91.

19 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 78.

20 See Chalier's fine essay titled "The Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas and the Hebraic Tradition" in *Ethics As First Philosophy: The Significance of Emmanuel Levinas for Philosophy, Literature and Religion*, ed. Adriaan Peperzak (New York: Routledge, 1995). She says quite rightly that those who reject Levinas's thinking often do so because they feel it leads to "a pathological feeling of guilt" and ask: "Do I really have to think I am responsible for all the sufferings that occur in the world? For all the atrocities? Is it not enough for me to be responsible for the wrong I have done?" (p. 18). Such a response to Levinas means that the person is on the way to understanding what he is saying about responsibility and guilt.

21 In *Totality and Infinity*, p. 300, Levinas writes: "Politics left to itself bears a tyranny within itself; it deforms the I and the Other who have given rise to it, for it judges them according to universal rules, and *in absentia*."

22 See Butler's interview with George Yancy titled "Mourning is a Political Act Amid the Pandemic and its Disparities" published on April 30, 2020 by truthout.org, https://truthout.org/articles/judith-butler-mourning-is-a-political-act-amid-the-pandemic-and-its-disparities/.

23 Levinas himself felt this weight of responsibility connected to his own identity as a European, as he expressed in the interview titled "What One Asks of a Saint One Asks of Oneself," 24: "Is it not true that I ask myself if I am starving someone else by existing? This is no product of my imagination! It is obvious that we Europeans are letting the world go hungry."

24 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 116.

25 Judith Butler and George Yancy, "Mourning is a Political Act."

26 The one exception to this is a remarkable passage on p. 148: Inspiration "is the possibility of being the author of what had been breathed in unbeknownst to me."

27 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 180.

28 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 15.

29 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 182.

30 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 182.

31 See the section of *Otherwise than Being* titled "Witness and Prophecy" that includes the remarkable sentence (p. 149): "to bear witness to God is precisely not to state this extraordinary word."

32 Levinas never claims to be a saint himself, only to be able to recognize saintliness as living and potentially dying for the other. In the interview titled "What One Asks of a Saint one Asks of Oneself" he says: "The philosopher is no saint, but he knows where saintliness is to be found" (p. 31).

33 This is in no way meant to excuse governments around the world that have failed to provide even basic protective medical equipment to their own healthcare workers. The governments of Russia, Brazil, and Mexico and the Trump administration are especially culpable in this regard.

34 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 177

35 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 183.

36 Levinas dedicated *Otherwise than Being* to his family members and to all the other Jews who were killed in the Holocaust, but he also dedicated it to all victims everywhere of hatred of the other person. In a very true sense it can be said that he dedicated the book to George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin, among so many others, and to all the victims of the long history of slavery in the Americas and to all victims of oppression based on sex and sexual orientation, all victims of hatred of the other person.